The Paris Commune of 1871

Jan Lavrinovski

All rights reserved

Contents

Introduction..... 1
The World Before the Commune..... 4
The Birth of the Commune..... 8
The Commune's Decrees and Reforms..... 13
Marx and Engels on the Commune..... 18
The Fall and the Lessons..... 23
From Marx and Engels to Lenin..... 30
The Commune's Legacy in World Socialism..... 34
Conclusion..... 42
Sources..... 46

Introduction

The Paris Commune of 1871 stands as one of the greatest turning points in the history of social and political struggle. It was the first time that the working class, not merely as a protesting crowd but as a conscious social force, took the power of a great city into its own hands and sought to reorganize life according to its own needs and collective thought. For seventy-two days Paris belonged to its workers. They attempted, often instinctively, to replace the rule of capital and privilege with a form of government based on equality, labor, and solidarity.

The Commune appeared at the crossroads of two historical epochs. Behind it lay the age of bourgeois revolutions that had proclaimed freedom and equality but left the worker still enslaved to property and capital. Before it opened the era of the worker revolutions that aimed not only to change political forms but to transform the very foundation of social life. The Commune thus marked the passage from the age of political revolution to the age of social revolution.

For Karl Marx, who watched events from London, the Commune revealed that the working class could no longer limit itself to demanding reforms within the bourgeois system; it had to create its own political power. In his famous address *The Civil War in France*, he hailed the Commune as the "finally discovered political form" through which the liberation of labor could begin. The event confirmed what Marx had long foreseen in theory: that the state is an instrument of class domination and that the workers, to free themselves, must break the old state machine and construct their own organs of rule.

Friedrich Engels, in later years, called the Commune "the dictatorship of the proletariat," not as a term of oppression but as a description of democracy raised to its highest level — the majority of working people governing directly without the parasitic layers of bureaucracy and standing army. Engels saw in the Commune the first outline of a state that would begin to disappear as class divisions faded.

Vladimir Lenin, writing half a century later, viewed the Commune as both a heroic achievement and a lesson carved in blood. To him it was the first demonstration that the workers could take power and govern themselves, but also proof of the need for revolutionary leadership and organization. When Lenin led the workers of Russia in 1917, he openly declared that the Soviets were "the continuation and development of the Paris Commune."

In the broader history of humanity, the Commune symbolizes a new step in the moral and social evolution of mankind. It was the attempt of ordinary people to build a community of equality and mutual aid in place of exploitation and rivalry. Though crushed by the united power of the French bourgeoisie and its foreign allies, its brief existence changed the thought of every genuine socialist and revolutionist who came after.

The Paris Commune was not an isolated French tragedy but the beginning of a worldwide movement. It joined the name of Paris with the universal call of Marx, Engels, and Lenin: "Workers of all countries, unite." Its failure was temporary; its significance, eternal.

Before 1871, Marxism existed mainly as a theoretical system — a scientific study of capitalist society and the laws of class struggle. Marx and Engels had outlined how human history moved through successive stages of economic development, and how the working class, created by modern industry, would eventually rise to abolish class exploitation. Yet their conception of the worker state remained largely theoretical. They knew that the bourgeois state could not serve the workers' cause, but the exact form of worker rule was still a matter of thought, not experience.

The Paris Commune gave Marxism its first great test in practice. The uprising of the Parisian workers did not arise from books or doctrines but from life itself — from hunger, war, and oppression. When the old state collapsed, the workers of Paris instinctively built a new power, founded on elected and revocable delegates, a citizen militia, and direct participation of the masses. For Marx, this spontaneous creation confirmed his central idea: that the emancipation of the workers must be achieved by the workers themselves. The Commune, therefore, was not a mere insurrection; it was the first experiment in socialist government.

Through the Commune, Marx deepened his theory of the state. He saw that the working class could not simply take control of the existing bourgeois machinery — the army, the police, the bureaucracy — and use it for its own ends. These institutions were instruments of class domination and had to be replaced by new ones that arose from the working people themselves. In *The Civil War in France*, Marx wrote that the Commune was "the political form at last discovered" through which social emancipation could begin. The Commune thus transformed Marxism from a critical philosophy of society into a revolutionary theory of power.

Engels, who had long shared Marx's materialist understanding of history, also reexamined his ideas in the light of 1871. He came to define the Commune as the practical expression of the "dictatorship of the proletariat," by which he meant the organized rule of the worker majority over the old exploiting minority. For Engels, this was the necessary stage between capitalist society and the classless communist future — a state born to abolish itself once class antagonisms disappeared. The Commune gave this idea flesh and form.

Lenin, studying Marx and Engels decades later, treated the Commune as the living bridge between theory and revolution. He recognized in it the first outline of the Soviet type of power — councils of workers and peasants governing directly, without a professional ruling class. For Lenin, Marxism after 1871 was no longer only an analysis of capitalism; it became the science of revolution itself. The Commune, even in its defeat, showed the road from the world of capital to the world of socialism.

From that moment, Marxist socialism ceased to be a doctrine of future expectation. It became a program of action grounded in the lessons of a real historical experience. The Commune

stood as proof that socialism was not a dream but a possible and necessary reality — one born of the creative power of the working class.

Although the Paris Commune was born from the unique soil of French history, its message transcended national boundaries. The workers of Paris fought for themselves, but in doing so they spoke for the entire class of laboring humanity. They demonstrated, before the eyes of the world, that ordinary workers could not only rise in rebellion but could also govern, organize, and begin to shape a new social order based on their own collective strength.

The bourgeois press of Europe portrayed the Communards as anarchic destroyers. In truth, they were the first builders of a new society. Their decrees on education, rent, the working day, and the equality of men and women were not the acts of a mob but of a conscious class striving to replace exploitation with cooperation. For this reason Marx called the Commune "the glorious harbinger of a new society." To him, it proved that the working class, once united, possessed the intelligence and moral power to lead humanity forward.

Engels also saw in the Commune a beacon that illuminated the path for workers everywhere. In Germany, Britain, Italy, and Russia, socialist movements drew courage from its example. Even where the bourgeois order seemed strongest, the Commune's memory whispered that another kind of power was possible — one in which the workers themselves took responsibility for social life. Engels wrote that "the memory of the Commune is immortal" because it had awakened in millions of workers a new sense of historical destiny.

Lenin, writing in the early twentieth century when the worker movement had become international, treated the Commune as the first chapter of a continuing world revolution. Its fall, he said, did not destroy the cause but scattered its seeds across the globe. From those seeds grew the socialist parties and later the soviets — the councils of workers that would one day rise again, not in one city but in entire countries. The Commune thus became not a French legend but a symbol of global solidarity, teaching that the struggle of workers in one land is inseparable from the struggle of all.

To the workers of the world, the Paris Commune offered three enduring lessons. First, that liberation cannot be granted from above; it must be conquered by the oppressed themselves. Second, that genuine democracy begins only when the masses directly hold power. And third, that the struggle for socialism is international — that the cause of a Parisian worker, a London dockhand, a German miner, or a Russian peasant is one and the same.

From that spring of 1871 came not only the smoke of battle but a vision that continues to burn in human thought: the idea that the people who work, create, and sustain life can also govern it. The Commune's flag, soaked in the blood of the Parisian workers, became the red banner of the world movement for emancipation — a message of courage, solidarity, and faith in humanity's collective future.

The World Before the Commune

The middle of the nineteenth century was a time of vast transformation and disappointment in Europe. The revolutions of 1848, which had swept across the continent with cries for freedom, democracy, and social justice, ended not in the liberation of the people but in the consolidation of bourgeois power. From Paris to Vienna, from Berlin to Budapest, the uprisings that had united workers, artisans, and the radical middle class were crushed, and their hopes were absorbed by the very order they sought to overthrow. The banners of "liberty, equality, fraternity" were replaced by the sober rule of capital, commerce, and property.

For Marx and Engels, who had participated in those revolutionary years, 1848 was a great lesson. It revealed that the bourgeoisie — once a progressive class in its struggle against feudalism — had reached its historical limit. Having secured its economic and political dominance, it now feared the very masses it had mobilized. The bourgeoisie turned from revolution to reaction, preferring alliance with kings and armies to any partnership with the workers. Marx observed that the revolutions of 1848 were "the revolution of the bourgeoisie, yet they proclaimed themselves the revolution of the people," and in this contradiction lay their downfall.

The decades that followed witnessed the rapid rise of industrial capitalism. Steam, railways, and machinery transformed Europe. Cities swelled with migrant workers drawn from the countryside, while wealth accumulated in the hands of a small owning class. Economic progress was accompanied by moral and social misery. Wages remained low, labor was unprotected, and child labor filled the factories. The new industrial order created both unprecedented productivity and unprecedented inequality.

The political consequences were equally profound. The old monarchies survived, but they adapted to capitalist society. The bourgeoisie learned to rule not through open revolt but through parliaments, credit, and the press. In France, the revolution of 1848 gave way to the empire of Napoleon III, whose regime combined political repression with economic modernization. Across Europe, nationalism and imperialism replaced the earlier democratic idealism. Governments spoke of order and civilization while expanding markets and colonies.

Yet beneath this apparent stability, the social contradictions deepened. The working class grew in number and consciousness. Trade unions, socialist clubs, and early worker parties began to appear. Marx and Engels, through the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 and the activities of the International Workingmen's Association founded in 1864, gave these movements a unified thought — the recognition that the workers of all countries share a common interest against capital.

By the time the 1870s approached, the bourgeois revolutions had exhausted their creative energy, and a new historical actor was emerging: the industrial proletariat. The old Europe of monarchs and landlords had given birth to a new Europe of factories, banks, and stock exchanges — and within it, to a new class that would carry forward the revolutionary struggle

in a different form. The Paris Commune would arise as the first great attempt of this class to shape its own destiny and to prove, in practice, the truths that Marx and Engels had drawn from the failures of 1848.

By the summer of 1870, Europe stood on the edge of a new conflict. The unification of Germany under Prussian leadership had shifted the balance of power on the continent, while the French Empire of Napoleon III, aging and unstable, sought to restore its prestige through war. The spark came with the Ems Dispatch — a diplomatic provocation that the French emperor seized upon to declare war on Prussia in July 1870. What he imagined as a brief campaign of national glory became a catastrophe for his regime and for the French bourgeois order it represented.

The Franco-Prussian War exposed the weakness of the Second Empire. Behind its imperial splendor lay corruption, speculation, and social inequality. The French army, ill-prepared and poorly led, suffered defeat after defeat at the hands of the disciplined Prussian forces organized by Bismarck. In early September 1870, at Sedan, Napoleon III himself was captured along with an entire army. The imperial myth collapsed in an instant. Paris erupted in protest, and on September 4 the workers and citizens proclaimed the fall of the Empire and the birth of the Republic.

Marx, observing events from London, warned the workers not to trust the new bourgeois government that replaced Napoleon — the so-called Government of National Defense. In his first address on the war to the International Workingmen's Association, he condemned both imperial ambitions: the French Empire's adventure and Prussia's nationalist expansion. He foresaw that the war, regardless of its outcome, would deepen class antagonisms in both countries. After Sedan, Marx wrote that the fall of the Empire might open a new revolutionary phase in France, but only if the workers acted independently of the bourgeois republicans.

Engels, a keen military analyst, studied the conflict from the standpoint of both strategy and social consequence. He understood that the Prussian victory would not bring liberty to Europe but a new militarism that would dominate the coming era. The triumph of Bismarck meant the triumph of a centralized, bureaucratic, and armed state serving capital. In that sense, the war signaled the arrival of modern imperialism — a system of competitive national powers feeding upon industrial and colonial expansion.

Inside France, the bourgeois republic that succeeded the Empire quickly showed its true character. The so-called defenders of the nation were more afraid of the armed workers of Paris than of the Prussian army at their gates. When the Prussians laid siege to Paris in September 1870, it was the people — artisans, laborers, and members of the National Guard — who bore the suffering and kept the city alive. Hunger, cold, and bombardment forged a new unity among the workers. They began to realize that their enemy was not only outside the walls but within — the ruling class that sought to restore its authority even in defeat.

Lenin later noted that this period was decisive in transforming patriotic resistance into class struggle. The betrayal of the bourgeois republicans, who surrendered to the Prussians and

prepared to disarm the National Guard, revealed to the Parisian workers that they could rely only on themselves. Out of the ruins of the Empire and the humiliation of France arose the first embryo of a worker power — the committees, clubs, and guards that would soon give birth to the Paris Commune.

Thus, the Franco-Prussian War and the fall of the Second Empire were not mere episodes of diplomacy or military strategy. They were the violent birth pains of a new social epoch. The collapse of the old imperial order opened the door to the first experiment in proletarian rule. What had begun as a national war ended as a class revolution.

When the Franco-Prussian War ended in France's defeat and the occupation of part of its territory, Paris stood as a city humiliated but unbroken. It was a capital without an emperor, filled with anger, hunger, and hope. The surrender signed by the bourgeois government in February 1871 handed over two provinces, imposed crushing reparations, and permitted German troops to parade through the streets of the nation's heart. For the workers of Paris, this was not merely a political failure — it was a national disgrace and a class betrayal.

The Government of National Defense, dominated by monarchists and moderate republicans, had retreated to Versailles, leaving the capital under siege and famine. The workers, small artisans, and lower clerks who made up the vast majority of Paris had survived the long winter of bombardment through solidarity and self-organization. In every district, neighborhood committees had been formed to distribute food, maintain order, and defend the city. These were not yet organs of power, but they embodied a new spirit of collective responsibility — a people governing themselves in practice when official authority had collapsed.

The National Guard, originally a citizen militia, had become the armed force of the Parisian people. Composed largely of workers and petty tradesmen, it elected its own officers and refused to surrender its weapons after the armistice. Its Central Committee, formed by delegates from the battalions, emerged as a new center of power independent of the government. The Guard symbolized a revolutionary duality: while the Versailles authorities claimed to represent France, Paris itself — armed, organized, and conscious — represented the will of the working class.

The social atmosphere of the city was electric. Cafés, clubs, and newspapers became schools of political thought. Marx's and Proudhon's ideas circulated side by side; Blanquists called for decisive insurrection, while internationalist workers, members of the First International, urged unity and socialist direction. Women played an active role, forming clubs and associations, tending the wounded, and agitating for equality and the right to bear arms. For the first time, the word "social republic" began to acquire living meaning — not an abstract slogan, but a vision born of shared suffering and common strength.

The bourgeois press and the government at Versailles feared this new Paris. To them, it was a city infected with socialism, ready to challenge both property and hierarchy. They demanded the disarmament of the National Guard and the return of the cannons that the people had paid

for by subscription during the siege. The attempt to seize those weapons on March 18, 1871, would ignite the uprising and give birth to the Commune.

Marx observed that the social forces at work in Paris were unlike any in previous revolutions. Here, the working class was not merely an ally of the bourgeoisie but an independent actor, conscious of its own aims. Engels later wrote that the conditions of 1871 created "a proletariat which had fought heroically and learned how to handle arms," and which, for the first time in history, stood face to face with the ruling class as an organized power.

Lenin would later recall that the strength of the Parisian workers lay in their courage and initiative, while their tragedy lay in the absence of a unified revolutionary party to guide them. But in that spring of 1871, no one yet knew how brief the experiment would be. What was clear was that Paris had become a living workshop of revolution — a city where the old world had collapsed and a new one was struggling to be born.

When the thunder of cannon echoed across Europe in 1870, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were already watching events with the keen eyes of revolutionaries who had lived through the upheavals of 1848. Both men, though exiled from their native lands, had never ceased to analyze the motion of history through the eyes of the working class. They understood that war between two great capitalist powers could only expose the contradictions of bourgeois society and accelerate the approach of new social struggles.

At the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War, Marx, speaking for the International Workingmen's Association, issued an address to the workers of France and Germany. He warned them not to be deceived by the patriotic slogans of their rulers. "The workers have no fatherland," he reminded them; their enemy was not the worker of another country but the class of capitalists and kings who sent them to die for profit and prestige. Marx foresaw that the war, whatever its military outcome, would shake the foundations of both empires. He predicted that defeat could awaken the revolutionary spirit in France and that the German victory might strengthen reactionary forces in Europe.

Engels, who had deep knowledge of military science, shared Marx's analysis. From the first weeks of the conflict, he recognized that Napoleon III's army was doomed by incompetence and corruption, while the Prussian state, disciplined and modern, would triumph. Yet Engels also knew that such a victory would not liberate Germany but bind it to a new imperialism under Bismarck. "A war of dynasties and capitalists," he called it — a war that would prepare, not peace, but a future of armed states and rival empires.

When the Second Empire fell and the French Republic was proclaimed, Marx greeted the event with cautious hope. In his second address to the International, he warned that the bourgeois republicans of the Government of National Defense would betray the working class as surely as the monarchists before them. The workers of Paris, he urged, must prepare for independence, must not trust those who preached patriotism while conspiring with reaction. He wrote that if the workers were driven to revolution, "then, as always, the responsibility will rest with the ruling classes."

Engels, too, understood that a new phase of struggle was beginning. He saw in the armed and self-organized people of Paris the embryo of a social power far beyond the liberal revolutions of the past. But neither he nor Marx expected that the workers would soon seize the entire administration of a great city. They knew that the material conditions for socialism were still immature in France, yet they also knew that history sometimes advances through bold experiments. When, in March 1871, the Parisian workers rose to defend their cannons and their dignity, Marx and Engels grasped instantly that this was not a mere riot — it was the birth of a new kind of revolution.

Marx followed the unfolding events with both admiration and anxiety. He admired the heroism of the Parisian proletariat, who had dared what no class had ever done before — to challenge not only a government but the very structure of capitalist rule. Yet he also foresaw the dangers of isolation, lack of coordination, and the hostility of the European powers. Still, he declared that even if the Commune were to perish, its example would live as "a beacon to the working class of the world."

Engels later wrote that Marx, more than anyone, understood the historical weight of what had begun in Paris. For decades they had sought the form in which the working class might wield power; in 1871, that form appeared, fragile but real. The Commune revealed in practice what their theory had foreseen: that the liberation of the workers required a state of a new type, created by and for those who labor.

In this sense, Marx and Engels did not foresee the Commune's immediate victory, but they recognized its immortal significance the moment it appeared. They saw that the struggles of Paris were not only French but human — that a new epoch had opened, one in which the workers would rise again and again until the old world of exploitation was gone.

The Birth of the Commune

The dawn of March 18, 1871, broke over Paris with the chill of early spring and the tense quiet of a city on edge. For months, the people of Paris had endured siege, hunger, and betrayal. The cannons on the heights of Montmartre — purchased by public subscription during the Prussian blockade — had become symbols of their defiance. These guns did not belong to the state or to the army; they belonged to the people, guarded by the citizen soldiers of the National Guard. When Adolphe Thiers, head of the bourgeois government at Versailles, ordered their seizure, he ignited the event that would give birth to the Paris Commune.

In the early hours, troops of the regular army marched into the city to disarm the National Guard. They advanced silently through the narrow streets, hoping to surprise the working-class districts. But the women of Montmartre, already awake to fetch bread and water, saw the soldiers approaching and raised the alarm. The bells rang, drums sounded, and the people poured into the streets. The soldiers, confronted not by an enemy army but by unarmed citizens — women, children, and workers — hesitated. Cries of "Don't shoot your brothers!"

rang out. The officers gave orders to fire, but the troops refused. Many turned their rifles on their commanders. General Lecomte, who had tried to enforce the order, was arrested by his own men.

By midmorning, the insurrection had spread across Paris. Barricades rose once more, as they had in the revolutions of 1830 and 1848, but this time the mood was different. It was not merely a protest against a government; it was a defense of a city's dignity and the independence of its people. The attempt to seize the cannons failed completely, and the government troops fled toward Versailles. In their retreat, they left behind not only the guns but their authority. Paris, for the moment, was free.

The Central Committee of the National Guard, meeting in the Hôtel de Ville, faced a decision unprecedented in history. The government had abandoned the capital; the army had withdrawn; the state apparatus had collapsed. Power lay in the streets, in the hands of the armed citizens. Should they march immediately on Versailles and overthrow the bourgeois assembly, or should they consolidate power within Paris and seek to build a new order? After hours of debate, the Committee chose to act with restraint. They declared that they held power only temporarily, until new municipal elections could be held. This decision, cautious and democratic, would later be praised for its honesty and condemned for its fatal hesitation.

Marx, following these events from London, saw in them the spontaneous emergence of a new kind of revolution. Here, for the first time, the workers of a great city had not only risen in arms but had defeated the bourgeois state within its own capital. The seizure of the cannons, he wrote, symbolized the transfer of power from the ruling class to the working class. Engels later described March 18 as "the day when the proletariat first took the stage of history as the ruling class."

Lenin would later call this moment the "birth of the first proletarian state." Yet, unlike later revolutions, the uprising of March 18 was unplanned. It was born of necessity, courage, and a deep instinct for freedom. The people of Paris did not yet know the vast meaning of what they had done, but the old order had fallen, and a new one was struggling to be born. The bourgeoisie fled to Versailles; the red flag was raised over the Hôtel de Ville. The working class, for the first time in history, stood as the master of its own destiny.

In the hours that followed the victory of March 18, 1871, Paris experienced a transformation without precedent. The soldiers of the regular army had withdrawn; the ministers and bureaucrats had fled to Versailles; the tricolor flag of the bourgeois republic had been lowered, and in its place rose the red banner of the working class. For the first time in modern history, a great European capital was governed not by monarchs, generals, or bankers, but by its own armed citizens — the National Guard.

The National Guard had begun as a civic militia during the earlier revolutions, but under the siege of Paris it had become the living symbol of popular self-defense. It was composed chiefly of workers, small craftsmen, clerks, and teachers — men who had defended their neighborhoods during months of hunger and bombardment. When the Empire fell and the bourgeois government sought to disarm them, they understood instinctively that surrendering

their weapons meant surrendering their freedom. The Guard was organized into battalions, each electing its own officers, and its Central Committee became the embryo of a new revolutionary authority.

On March 19, the day after the uprising, the Central Committee issued a proclamation to the citizens of Paris. It declared that it did not wish to usurp power, but to hand it over to a freely elected Commune that would represent the whole population. In that declaration resounded both the humility and the grandeur of the new movement: the people, having seized power, refused to rule through a clique or a party; they sought instead to construct a collective authority resting on universal suffrage and revocability. Marx later wrote that this act revealed the moral superiority of the workers over the bourgeoisie, who clung to power through deceit and force.

The Central Committee took immediate steps to secure the city. It reopened bakeries, restored communications, and organized the defense of the gates. There was no terror, no looting, no vengeance. Paris, so often portrayed as a city of chaos, displayed remarkable order and discipline under the self-rule of its citizens. Even foreign observers were struck by the calm that reigned in the streets, where workers in their blouses and soldiers in their red trousers walked side by side beneath the red flag of the Commune.

Meanwhile, at Versailles, Thiers and the Assembly of property owners prepared for revenge. Their newspapers denounced the Parisians as bandits and madmen, while they gathered troops and money to crush the insurrection. Yet the workers' government did not strike first. The Central Committee hesitated, unwilling to begin civil war and hoping instead for a peaceful recognition of the Commune. This hesitation — born of democratic scruple and humanitarian thought — would later prove fatal. Engels would call it "the greatest mistake of the Commune: not marching immediately on Versailles."

Still, in those first days, the mood in Paris was one of confidence and joy. The people felt, perhaps for the first time, that they were the masters of their own fate. Lenin, reflecting on this moment half a century later, would write that the National Guard embodied the new principle of worker power — an army of the people, defending not a class of exploiters but the laboring masses themselves. "The Commune," he said, "created the embryo of the worker state by arming the people and disarming the bourgeoisie."

Thus, in the brief interval between the fall of the old order and the establishment of the Commune, Paris stood as a city reborn. The power that had always been concentrated in the hands of the few was now dispersed among the many. In the hands of the National Guard and the neighborhood committees, the working class held not only rifles but the destiny of history.

On March 26, 1871, the people of Paris went to the polls to elect their new government. It was an election unlike any that had taken place in modern history. There were no royal decrees, no orders from a central power, no class of professionals commanding obedience. The city governed itself. Every district chose delegates to the Commune, each bound by mandate and subject to recall. In these simple but profound measures, the Commune

embodied the principle of popular sovereignty — authority derived not from wealth or tradition but from the collective will of the workers and citizens.

The Commune was composed of ninety-two members, representing a wide variety of political tendencies: Blanquists, Jacobins, Proudhonists, and members of the International Workingmen's Association. Despite their differences, they were united by one great aim — to build a social republic founded on labor, equality, and fraternity. They met in the Hôtel de Ville, the same building that had housed the governments of kings and emperors, now turned into the workshop of a people's power. The red flag flew from its roof as the symbol of the new order.

The Commune abolished the standing army and replaced it with the armed people. It declared that public service was to be a duty, not a privilege; that no official was to receive a salary higher than that of a skilled worker; and that all officials were to be subject to immediate recall by their electors. These measures, simple yet revolutionary, tore away the veil that had long separated rulers from the ruled. Marx hailed these acts as "the effective suppression of the old bureaucratic state," the transformation of government from an instrument of domination into an organ of service.

In the organization of the Commune, the workers of Paris discovered a form of government that reflected their own life and labor. Its structure was practical and collective: committees were established for finance, education, labor, public safety, and justice, each responsible to the whole body. Decisions were debated openly, and even the most modest citizens could attend and participate. It was, as Engels later described, "a working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time."

The Commune's principles of revocability and equality were its moral foundation. Power ceased to be something separate from the people; it became a function of the community. In the words of Marx, the Commune was "the political form at last discovered" for the emancipation of labor. It was a living demonstration that the state could be reshaped not as a fortress above society but as a framework for collective self-rule.

For Lenin, writing in *State and Revolution*, this organization was the key to understanding how socialism could take shape in practice. The Commune, he said, replaced the old bureaucratic machine with direct administration by the working class. It showed that democracy was not an end in itself but a means for the workers to transform the economy and society. The lessons of 1871, he argued, would later guide the Soviets in Russia.

But in 1871, the Parisians were not guided by theory alone. They acted from the natural instinct of solidarity born of struggle. The same people who had built barricades now met in assemblies, debated decrees, and organized food supplies. In those days, Paris lived as no modern city had ever lived — not as a mass of subjects, but as a community of equals. The Commune's councils, elections, and revocable mandates were not abstractions but the daily practice of democracy, a model of what Marx, Engels, and later Lenin called the first true worker government in history.

The birth of the Commune was not the result of a carefully planned conspiracy or the execution of a party program. It was the spontaneous creation of a class that, through its own struggle, discovered the form of its political power. The Parisian workers had not studied the structure of the future state in advance; they built it from necessity and collective instinct. The Commune emerged as the natural expression of their unity, their courage, and their experience as laborers who knew cooperation through their daily toil.

For Marx, this was the most extraordinary fact of 1871. The working class, without the direction of a ruling elite, had found within itself the capacity to rule. In *The Civil War in France*, he wrote that "the great social measure of the Commune was its own working existence." The workers had not seized the old state machinery to use it for new ends; they had created a new type of state altogether. The Commune replaced hierarchy with participation, bureaucracy with service, command with collective deliberation. It was the first concrete demonstration that the workers could manage the affairs of society without masters.

Engels saw in this event the living proof of what he and Marx had long argued in theory — that the state, as an instrument of class domination, would disappear only when the working class itself became the ruling class. The Commune, he wrote, was "the dictatorship of the proletariat," not as tyranny, but as the organized power of the majority. This new form of government was both democratic and revolutionary: democratic because all officials were chosen and recallable by the people, revolutionary because it overthrew the very foundations of capitalist rule.

In this sense, the Commune revealed more than the heroism of the workers; it revealed their creative genius. They did not imitate the institutions of the bourgeoisie. They forged their own. Their councils and committees, their open debates and collective decisions, showed that administration could be transparent, simple, and accessible to all. Marx noted that "instead of deciding once in three or six years which member of the ruling class was to misrepresent the people, universal suffrage was to serve the people, constituted in Communes."

Lenin, looking back from the experience of 1917, regarded this as the decisive turning point in the history of socialism. He called the Commune "the first rough draft of the proletarian state." It had shown that the working class could not take over the bourgeois state apparatus — it had to break it and replace it with institutions of its own. The Soviets, the councils of workers and peasants that arose in Russia, were built consciously upon the model of the Commune. Thus the Parisian workers, though defeated, became the ancestors of all future revolutions.

But the discovery of this new form of power was not purely organizational; it was also moral. For a brief time, Paris lived under a government where there were no privileged rulers, no separation between those who governed and those who obeyed. The people themselves, through their assemblies and elected delegates, decided their fate. The city's life pulsed with collective energy: workers managing workshops, teachers reorganizing schools, women forming revolutionary clubs, soldiers defending not a dynasty but their own freedom.

The Commune was, as Marx said, “the gloriously working, fighting body of the people.” In its councils and committees, the working class for the first time recognized itself as the ruling class — not through domination, but through cooperation. What arose from the streets of Paris in 1871 was not merely a rebellion; it was the discovery of a new political form, one that embodied in practice the very idea of socialism: the self-government of the workers.

The Commune’s Decrees and Reforms

Once the Commune was established, it moved rapidly to translate the people’s victory into the institutions of a new social order. Its decrees, enacted in a few short weeks, were guided by one principle — to make the state serve those who worked, not those who owned. In every act of the Commune, one could see the attempt to turn democracy from a formality into a living practice of equality. Though pressed by siege and war, the workers of Paris showed that they could not only destroy the old but begin to build the new.

The first great measure of the Commune was the abolition of the standing army. The professional army, which had long been the tool of monarchs and bourgeois rulers, was replaced by the armed people — the National Guard. Every citizen was to bear arms for the defense of the Commune, and officers were to be elected by their soldiers. This act struck directly at the core of the old state. Marx hailed it as the “suppression of the instrument of class domination itself,” the transformation of coercion into collective defense. Engels later remarked that the Commune’s abolition of the standing army revealed the true path toward a state that would one day disappear, since the people themselves had taken over its functions.

The Commune also began the reconstruction of education. It declared that schooling must be free, secular, and universal, and that the Church — long the ally of privilege — must be separated from the state and excluded from education. Teachers were to be paid as public servants, schools opened to both sexes, and new forms of civic instruction introduced to cultivate equality and solidarity. These decrees, though only partially realized before the Commune’s fall, were revolutionary in spirit. They aimed to shape citizens who could think and act as free members of a collective society. Marx saw in them the moral foundation of socialism — the education of a generation no longer enslaved by dogma or ignorance.

In the sphere of social and gender equality, the Commune took steps unprecedented in its time. Though women did not yet have the right to vote, they were at the heart of the revolutionary life of Paris. They organized in clubs, worked in hospitals and kitchens, fought on the barricades, and demanded recognition as equals in the struggle. The Union des Femmes, led by women such as Elisabeth Dmitrieff — a member of the International Workingmen’s Association — fought for equal pay, the right to work, and social protection for widows and orphans of the National Guard. The Commune’s decrees supported these demands by affirming women’s participation in labor and public service. Engels would later call this awakening of women “the beginning of their liberation through the social transformation of labor.”

At the same time, the Commune moved toward labor reform. It suspended the payment of rents accumulated during the siege, abolished night work in bakeries, and prohibited the sale of objects pledged at the pawnshops. Workshops abandoned by their owners were to be taken over by workers' cooperatives, organized through trade unions and associations. These measures were not yet socialism in its full form, but they pointed unmistakably in that direction: the control of production by those who produce. Marx called them "the germs of the economic emancipation of labor," the first attempt to replace capitalist exploitation with cooperative labor.

Lenin, reflecting on these measures in *State and Revolution*, emphasized that the Commune's decrees proved that the working class, even under the most difficult conditions, could organize society more humanely and rationally than the bourgeoisie. He wrote that the Commune had shown "the creative power of the masses in constructing their own organs of government and their own rules of life."

Every decree of the Commune carried within it both immediate relief and far-reaching vision. Abolishing the army, freeing education, recognizing the equality of women, and protecting labor were not isolated reforms but parts of a single movement — the substitution of collective solidarity for privilege, and social duty for exploitation. Though the Commune survived barely two months, in those weeks it achieved what centuries of bourgeois rule had never attempted: the rule of the working people for the working people.

The Paris Commune was more than a political transformation; it was a profound awakening of human spirit. In those seventy-two days, the workers and artisans of Paris displayed a moral and social energy that astonished even their enemies. Out of the ruins of siege and starvation arose a city alive with solidarity, self-discipline, and creative force. For the first time, the people who labored with their hands also governed with their minds. The line separating the rulers from the ruled vanished, and with it came a surge of collective dignity — the feeling that life could be organized on principles of justice and fraternity.

The Commune's decrees were the visible side of this renewal; the invisible side was the moral transformation of daily life. Workshops, printshops, schools, and public offices continued to function, not through orders from above, but through the voluntary cooperation of citizens who felt ownership of their work. There was no chaos, no plunder, no disorder. Even foreign journalists who had expected anarchy admitted that Paris was calmer and more humane under worker rule than under the empire. Marx observed that "the working people of Paris, amid the roar of battle and the horror of siege, displayed a moderation, a magnanimity, and an order which the bourgeois republic had never known."

The artisans and small craftsmen of Paris, many of whom had long suffered from industrial competition and debt, brought to the Commune their traditions of mutual aid and solidarity. These men and women, who had once organized cooperatives and trade associations to survive the capitalist market, now placed their experience at the service of a collective administration. They saw in the Commune the possibility of reviving the dignity of labor — of making work not a burden imposed by others but a contribution to the common good. This moral sense of shared responsibility gave the Commune its strength and its beauty.

Women, too, embodied the spirit of this new humanity. They opened hospitals, formed committees, and created networks of aid that fed the hungry and cared for the wounded. In the poorest districts, where life had been hardest, women's organizations became centers of both compassion and revolutionary fervor. They taught that social emancipation could not be separated from the liberation of women, that equality must begin in the home and workplace as much as in politics. Engels later wrote that the participation of women in the Commune showed that "a new social force had entered history."

Every corner of Paris bore witness to this moral rebirth. Streets were cleaned, schools reopened, and theaters played again — not for luxury, but for the spirit of the people. The press flourished with discussion and criticism, expressing freely the diverse views of the workers and intellectuals. Clubs and assemblies met nightly, debating the meaning of liberty and the future of society. The people were learning, in the very act of governing, what freedom truly meant.

Lenin, reflecting on these days, called this atmosphere the "creative energy of the proletariat in power." The Commune, he said, proved that the workers possess not only strength to destroy the old but imagination to build the new. This creativity, born of necessity and nourished by solidarity, was the Commune's greatest moral victory. It was a glimpse of what Marx had foreseen — a society in which the working people become "the living soul of social organization."

Even though the guns of Versailles would soon silence this experiment, the moral force unleashed in Paris could not be extinguished. The example of the Communards showed that when workers and artisans act collectively, they can transform both society and themselves. They discovered, through struggle, that the true wealth of humanity lies not in gold or property but in solidarity — in the boundless energy of free human beings working together for their common good.

When Marx sat down in London to write *The Civil War in France*, he did so not as a distant observer, but as one who recognized in the events of Paris the living proof of his thought. For years he and Engels had argued that the state, as an instrument of class domination, could not serve the liberation of the workers. Yet until the spring of 1871, this had remained a theoretical conclusion. The Paris Commune gave it flesh and blood. It showed that the working class, in taking power, could not simply seize the apparatus of the old bourgeois state and put it to new uses; it had to dismantle it and construct something entirely different in both spirit and form.

Marx's admiration for the Communards was profound. He praised them not merely for their heroism but for their political clarity — even if achieved through instinct rather than doctrine. "The working class," he wrote, "cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes." That sentence, perhaps the most famous in the history of socialism, expressed the essence of what the Commune had revealed. The bureaucracy, the standing army, the centralized ministries, and the police — all these were not neutral tools. They were the very organs of bourgeois domination, built to defend private property and

social privilege. To use them would be to preserve them. To free humanity, the workers had to create their own organs of rule.

The Commune achieved precisely that. It replaced the standing army with the armed people, the bureaucratic hierarchy with elected delegates, the rule of decrees with open deliberation. Marx saw in this the outline of the future worker state — not a continuation of the old machinery under new management, but its opposite: a democratic order rooted in the life of the working class. He described the Commune as "the political form at last discovered" through which economic emancipation could begin. This form was not invented by philosophers but born from the experience of struggle.

Engels later remarked that Marx's famous sentence "was the key to the entire socialist revolution." The Commune had turned what had been theory into practice. By its very existence, it destroyed the illusion that the state could be used as a neutral instrument. Instead, it taught that the state must be remade from the ground up, that democracy must reach into every aspect of social life — from the workshop to the school, from the street to the council chamber.

Marx's admiration for the Commune was therefore not sentimental; it was scientific and revolutionary. He studied its organization, its decrees, its errors, and its spirit, seeking in them the universal laws of proletarian revolution. In the Commune's council, he saw the model of a working body where those who legislate also execute, where officials are responsible to their electors, and where public service is stripped of privilege. This, he believed, was the first concrete step toward a society in which political power would no longer stand apart from the people but be dissolved into their daily cooperation.

Lenin, half a century later, took this same insight as the foundation of *State and Revolution*. The task of the proletarian revolution, he said, was not to seize the bourgeois state but to destroy it and replace it with institutions of the Commune type — a state that is no longer a machine of oppression, but a transitional form preparing the disappearance of all class rule.

In admiring the Commune, Marx was admiring not only an event but a discovery — the revelation that the working class, in rising to defend itself, had also found the form of its future government. The phrase "cannot simply lay hold" was not a denial of revolution but its highest affirmation: that true liberation demands not possession of power as it exists, but the creation of power in a new, collective, and human form.

Friedrich Engels, who had shared every step of Marx's theoretical and political journey, saw in the Paris Commune the confirmation of their lifelong study of class struggle. If Marx had uncovered the economic foundation of capitalist society, Engels gave particular attention to the forms of political power that corresponded to each mode of production. The Commune, he believed, revealed for the first time the political form of the working class — a democracy so profound that it transcended the limits of bourgeois liberalism.

In his preface to Marx's *The Civil War in France*, written years later, Engels called the Commune "the dictatorship of the proletariat." He did not use this term in its later distorted

sense of tyranny, but in its scientific meaning — the organized power of the majority, the rule of the working people over the old exploiting classes. In the Commune, Engels wrote, this dictatorship appeared not as despotism but as "the most democratic of all democracies." Its essence was not coercion but participation: a government of workers governing themselves.

Engels emphasized the practical character of this new democracy. The Commune's members were not professional politicians or bureaucrats; they were workers, artisans, teachers, and soldiers of the National Guard. They combined legislative and executive functions, ensuring that those who made decisions also carried them out. This direct connection between the people and their representatives broke the traditional separation between rulers and ruled — the foundation of every previous class state. Engels saw in this the beginning of a new type of administration, simple in form yet revolutionary in content.

For Engels, the Commune's measures — revocable mandates, equal pay for officials, the replacement of the standing army with the armed people — were not isolated reforms. They were the structural features of a new social order. He pointed out that the Commune, even without fully realizing its intentions, had begun to dissolve the state as an instrument standing above society. "The state," Engels wrote, "is not abolished, it disappears," and in the Commune he saw this process beginning. The organs of coercion were being transformed into organs of cooperation; authority was becoming responsibility.

Engels also admired the moral and intellectual climate that this new democracy had created. In the Commune's short life, power ceased to be the privilege of the educated or the wealthy. It became an act of service, guided by collective reason and public accountability. Engels contrasted this to the bourgeois parliament, where the people's will was surrendered once every few years to representatives who then ruled in their name but against their interests. The Commune's democracy, by contrast, was continuous — a living exchange between the people and their delegates.

This insight shaped Engels's later writings on the state. When he reexamined his earlier work *Anti-Dühring* and *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, he used the experience of the Commune to illustrate how every state is a temporary structure arising from class conflict, destined to disappear once classes are abolished. The Commune had offered the first practical vision of this future — a "state of the working people" that would gradually cease to be a state in the old sense.

Lenin, studying Engels's conclusions, would later remark that the Commune represented "the first attempt to begin this process of disappearance." What Marx and Engels had once described as theory was now visible in reality: the embryo of proletarian democracy, fragile yet full of potential.

Engels saw the Commune not as a finished model, but as a beginning — a first outline of what would one day mature through broader revolutions. Its form was incomplete, its institutions improvised, yet its essence was clear: the working class, for the first time in history, had created a government of its own type, in which democracy and socialism were no longer separate ideals but the same living practice.

Marx and Engels on the Commune

When the guns of Versailles began to roar against Paris, Marx took up his pen in London to defend the Communards — not only against their military enemies, but against the calumnies of Europe's bourgeois press. In May 1871, even before the last barricades had fallen, he completed his great work *The Civil War in France*, the most profound and passionate document of the International Workingmen's Association. In it, Marx gave voice to the silent dead of the Commune and proclaimed to the world that their struggle was not a reckless uprising, but the most advanced expression of human liberation to that date.

From the first page, Marx made clear that the Commune was not a mere episode in French politics but a world-historic event. "Working men's Paris," he wrote, "with its Commune, will be forever celebrated as the glorious harbinger of a new society." The bourgeoisie, frightened by the sight of armed workers governing themselves, tried to depict the Commune as an orgy of chaos and crime. Marx answered that it was, on the contrary, "the first revolution in which the working class was acknowledged as the only class capable of social initiative." His defense was not an apology, but a declaration of triumph: the Commune had revealed, even in defeat, the creative power of the proletariat.

Marx dissected the hypocrisy of the bourgeois republicans who, while claiming to represent liberty, allied with Prussian bayonets to massacre their own people. He contrasted their vengeance — "the most ferocious slaughter of modern times" — with the magnanimity of the Communards, who had respected their enemies and abolished capital punishment. "History," he wrote, "has no like example of such greatness." For Marx, the Commune's moral superiority lay not in its success, but in its aims and methods: it sought no domination, no conquest, no privilege, only the emancipation of all who worked.

The central argument of *The Civil War in France* was that the Commune had solved, in practice, a problem that revolutionary theory had long posed: the question of the state. The workers of Paris had shown that liberation could not come through the capture of the existing government apparatus, but through its destruction and replacement by a new kind of state — one that was democratic, participatory, and inseparable from the people themselves. Marx wrote that "the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes," for that machinery was built to preserve exploitation. The Commune, by contrast, was an instrument of liberation precisely because it had broken that machine.

Marx's tone throughout the work combined analysis with deep feeling. Behind the economic and political reasoning was his immense admiration for the Communards' humanity — their patience, their self-sacrifice, their refusal to descend into vengeance. Even in the midst of war, they enacted social measures that anticipated a just future: education reform, equality for women, workers' control, and the end of clerical privilege. "The greatness of their act," Marx declared, "will live as long as the oppressed have cause to struggle."

Engels later said that in *The Civil War in France*, Marx had "raised the banner of the Commune over all Europe." The text became the manifesto of proletarian internationalism, read and studied by socialists from London to Berlin, from Geneva to St. Petersburg. It gave the working class not only a defense of the past, but a vision for the future — the image of a state that would no longer be the organ of the few over the many, but the means by which the many could govern themselves.

Lenin would later describe this work as "the greatest revolutionary testament of the nineteenth century." In it, he found the foundation for his own conception of the worker state — a state modeled not on the bourgeois republic, but on the Commune of Paris. For Marx, the Commune was not simply a revolt crushed by the bourgeoisie; it was the first practical revelation of a new social order. Its fire, he believed, would be rekindled wherever workers rose against oppression.

"The Commune," Marx wrote, "has fallen. But if the working class once more takes its flag, it will be the flag of the world's republic." These words, written amid defeat, transformed tragedy into prophecy. They were both a eulogy and a call — a defense of the Commune before the world, and a summons to all workers to continue what Paris had begun.

Years after the smoke of the Paris Commune had cleared, Engels returned again and again to its meaning. To him, it was not a lost episode of French politics but a turning point in the history of the working class. The Commune had given living form to what he and Marx had long described in theory: the transition from the rule of a minority to the conscious self-government of the majority. In his later writings and prefaces, Engels named this new political form "the dictatorship of the proletariat" — a term much misunderstood in later times, but which in his thought meant nothing other than the organized power of the workers themselves, expressed through democratic control over all aspects of social life.

Engels saw in the Commune the first real example of such power. He wrote that "look at the Paris Commune. That was the dictatorship of the proletariat." By this, he meant that the working class had exercised political authority directly, without the mediation of a privileged bureaucracy, a monarch, or a capitalist class. The workers did not abolish democracy; they expanded it beyond anything known under bourgeois rule. Officials were elected, subject to recall, and paid no more than ordinary laborers. Public administration became a public trust rather than a profession. The distinction between state and society, between rulers and ruled, began to dissolve.

Engels contrasted this with the "parliamentary democracy" of the bourgeois world, which, in his view, reduced the people's participation to an empty ritual. Under capitalism, the people voted once every few years to choose who would misrepresent them; under the Commune, they governed continuously through their own councils and delegates. This, for Engels, was democracy in its highest and truest form — a working democracy. The Commune had proven that freedom and authority need not be opposed; that when the people themselves hold power, authority becomes the collective expression of freedom.

In his 1891 introduction to *The Civil War in France*, Engels went further. He pointed out that the Commune had shown the practical steps necessary for the workers' rule: the destruction of the old state machine, the replacement of the standing army by the armed people, the recallability of all officials, and the subordination of technical administration to the will of the community. These, he argued, were not dreams or utopias but concrete measures that any real proletarian revolution would have to undertake. "All revolutions," Engels wrote, "up to now have perfected this state machine, whereas it must be broken, smashed." In that sentence, he anticipated the central thesis that Lenin would later expand in *State and Revolution*.

To Engels, the Commune also revealed the moral quality of proletarian power. The bourgeoisie had slandered it as anarchy and destruction, yet it was the most orderly and humane government France had known. Its justice was not vengeance, its discipline was self-imposed, and its law was based on social duty rather than privilege. The working class, he wrote, had shown that it could rule without reproducing the oppression of its former masters.

At the same time, Engels was clear-eyed about the Commune's limits. It had lacked centralization and coordination; it hesitated to act decisively against Versailles. Yet these weaknesses did not diminish its importance. On the contrary, Engels regarded them as lessons for the future — proof that while the form of worker democracy had been discovered, its content would mature only through wider revolutions. The Commune, he said, "was not the final word of the proletarian revolution, but its first halting step."

Lenin later remarked that Engels's understanding of the Commune transformed socialism from a dream of equality into a science of political organization. What had once been called "utopian socialism" became, through the experience of 1871, a concrete strategy for seizing and reconstructing power. The dictatorship of the proletariat, in its original Marxist sense, was not an apparatus of coercion but a means for the working class to reorganize society in its own image — to end class rule by exercising its own collective authority.

Engels's final verdict on the Commune was filled with both pride and reverence. "The memory of the Commune," he wrote, "is sacred. Its martyrs are enshrined in the great heart of the working class." For him, the phrase "dictatorship of the proletariat" did not belong to the vocabulary of oppression but to that of human emancipation — a historical necessity for building a society without masters or slaves. The Commune had not perished in vain; it had revealed to the workers of all nations the form of their coming power.

To Marx and Engels, the Paris Commune was not only a political event but a living confirmation of their materialist understanding of history. Their theory, developed through decades of study and struggle, held that human societies are shaped above all by the mode of production — by the way people organize their labor and distribute its products. Out of these material relations arise the classes, institutions, and ideas that dominate an era. The Commune, for them, was the moment when this historical process became visible in action — when the working class, born of industrial capitalism, rose to assert itself as the new ruling force of history.

For Marx, the Commune was proof that history advances not by the ideals of individuals, but by the movement of classes driven by their material conditions. The Parisian workers had not taken up arms for abstract principles; they acted from the lived experience of exploitation, poverty, and the betrayal of the bourgeois republic. The siege, the hunger, and the humiliation of France were the direct results of capitalist greed and imperial rivalry. When the workers of Paris seized power, they did not do so out of utopian enthusiasm but because the existing social order had become intolerable. “It was not the Commune that was utopian,” Marx wrote, “but the belief that the old society could continue.”

Engels, in his later writings, emphasized that the Commune revealed the deep connection between economic base and political form. The bourgeoisie, he explained, had created a state suited to its own interests — centralized, bureaucratic, and armed to defend property. The workers, in turn, created a form suited to theirs — decentralized, cooperative, and open to public control. The Commune was therefore not an accident or an invention, but the necessary outcome of a changing social structure. It arose because industrial capitalism had produced a class capable of collective organization, solidarity, and discipline — the very qualities required to rule.

In this way, the Commune confirmed what Marx and Engels had written in *The Communist Manifesto*: that the working class, through struggle, would become both the gravedigger of capitalism and the architect of a new society. The historical movement of labor was no longer a mere prediction — it had appeared in the streets of Paris as a living fact. The old theory of gradual reform collapsed before the evidence of 1871. As Marx noted, “the Commune demonstrated that the working class cannot be content with the existing machinery of the state; it must break it and replace it with its own.”

The materialist conception of history thus received its greatest vindication not in a book, but in a revolution. The Commune showed that ideas themselves are born of struggle — that revolutionary consciousness grows from the conditions of life. The Parisian workers did not first read Marx to act; they acted, and in their action confirmed Marx’s thought. History, as Marx once said, is made by human beings, but not under conditions of their own choosing. The workers of Paris had taken the conditions given to them — defeat, misery, and betrayal — and turned them into the ground for a new beginning.

Lenin, reflecting on this later, wrote that the Commune was “a living demonstration of historical materialism.” It showed that when the economic system reaches its limits, new social forces emerge to reshape it. The Commune proved that socialism was not a dream imposed from outside history but the natural outgrowth of capitalism’s own contradictions. In its councils, its decrees, and its collective spirit, one could see the material foundation of a future society — cooperation replacing competition, labor valued above property, human association in place of class rule.

Thus, the Commune did more than vindicate Marx’s theory; it gave it breath and substance. It turned materialism from a method of analysis into a guide for revolutionary action. Through the Commune, the working class not only confirmed the truth of Marx’s historical thought but advanced it — transforming philosophy into living history.

The experience of the Paris Commune did more than confirm the materialist conception of history — it transformed Marx's entire understanding of the state and of the forms through which the working class must conduct its struggle. Before 1871, Marx had written that the state was "the executive committee of the bourgeoisie," an organ born of irreconcilable class divisions. The Commune revealed, in practice, how such an instrument could be broken and replaced by a new form of authority drawn from the life of the working people themselves. In this way, it deepened his analysis of the state as both a product of class society and an obstacle that must be overcome for human freedom to emerge.

Through the Commune, Marx saw that the destruction of the old state apparatus was not merely a question of seizing political offices or controlling parliaments, but of dismantling the entire machinery of coercion that upheld class rule — the bureaucracy, the army, the police, and the standing hierarchies of privilege. The Communards had done this instinctively: they abolished the army, turned officials into elected servants, and fused legislation with execution. Their actions confirmed that the emancipation of the working class could not be achieved by occupying the state, but only by creating a new one in its own image — a state of the workers, transitional and destined to disappear as class distinctions dissolved.

This insight gave new depth to Marx's conception of class struggle. He had always understood it as the motor of history, but after the Commune it became clearer that this struggle was not confined to economic demands or political representation — it was the struggle for the form of power itself. The workers' class interest was not only to improve their condition within capitalism but to transform the entire structure of society. The Commune illustrated that the political domination of the proletariat was the necessary condition for its social liberation. In Marx's words, "between capitalist and communist society lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of one into the other," and the Commune was the first historical glimpse of that period.

The Commune also reshaped Marx's idea of revolutionary organization. The workers of Paris had achieved the impossible, but they had done so without a unified direction. Their courage was immense, their initiative boundless, yet their efforts lacked coordination. The Commune suffered from political fragmentation — divided among Proudhonists, Blanquists, and various socialist tendencies. From this, Marx drew a sober conclusion: that the working class, to succeed, must possess not only revolutionary passion but revolutionary organization — a party capable of uniting its efforts, linking economic and political struggle, and giving conscious direction to spontaneous revolt. The International Workingmen's Association had provided a moral bond, but not yet the organizational structure required for victory.

Engels, writing later, shared this view. He saw the Commune as both a triumph and a warning. It had shown the creative power of the proletariat, but also the danger of improvisation in the face of a well-organized enemy. "The Commune," Engels wrote, "was the child of the working class, but an orphan in its struggle." Its lack of coordination and decisive leadership allowed the forces of Versailles to recover and strike back. From this, Marx and Engels concluded that the success of future revolutions would depend on

disciplined organization rooted in the masses — not a conspiratorial minority, but a conscious vanguard bound by the collective will of the workers themselves.

Lenin would later take these lessons as the cornerstone of his revolutionary thought. He interpreted Marx's analysis of the Commune as proof that the proletariat requires both the spontaneous creativity of the masses and the conscious guidance of a political organization. "The Commune," Lenin wrote, "taught the workers how to fight; it showed them that victory is possible only when the struggle is directed." The synthesis of these two elements — spontaneity and organization — became central to the later Marxist-Leninist conception of revolution.

Thus, the Commune did not merely deepen Marx's theory; it gave it practical direction. It transformed the abstract analysis of the state and class struggle into a concrete program of revolutionary transformation. From that moment on, Marx and Engels regarded the Commune not only as a heroic event but as a manual written in blood — a living guide for the working class of every country. The thought born from its ashes would shape every future attempt to build a worker's government, linking theory and practice, science and struggle, into a single movement toward human emancipation.

The Fall and the Lessons

By late May 1871, the Paris Commune stood surrounded by enemies and betrayed by exhaustion. For seventy-two days, the workers of Paris had governed themselves with courage and restraint, but the forces of Versailles had been gathering strength. Adolphe Thiers, head of the bourgeois government, had rebuilt his army with the help of Prussian prisoners released under the armistice, and foreign powers, fearing the spread of revolution, silently blessed his cause. The same European monarchies that had fought one another months before now united in hatred of the working class.

On May 21, the Versailles troops broke through the city's western gates at Point-du-Jour. What followed was not a battle but a massacre. House by house, street by street, the army advanced, executing prisoners, women, and children alike. The defenders fought from every doorway and barricade, transforming the narrow streets into fortresses. But they were hopelessly outnumbered. The final resistance centered around the working-class districts — Belleville, Ménilmontant, and the Buttes-Chaumont — where men and women alike took up arms. The red flag still flew over the Hôtel de Ville, but by May 24 it was in flames.

The week that followed — La Semaine Sanglante, the "Bloody Week" — became one of the darkest chapters in modern history. The bourgeois press called it "the restoration of order"; Marx called it "the slaughter of the innocents." Entire neighborhoods were destroyed. The army executed workers in groups against the walls of Père Lachaise cemetery, where the last defenders were shot beside their barricade. Prisoners were lined up in the streets and killed without trial. The number of dead is still uncertain — some said twenty thousand, others forty

thousand. The cruelty of Versailles knew no limit: women accused of being *pétroleuses* were burned or shot, though most had never touched fire or weapon.

Marx wrote, “The bourgeoisie has revealed itself in its true form. Its civilization ends in orgy and blood.” He saw in the massacre the naked truth of class society — that the ruling class would rather drown a city in its own blood than allow the workers to govern themselves. Engels, equally outraged, described the slaughter as “the revenge of the bourgeois for the terror of its own conscience.” The bourgeoisie had feared the Commune not for its violence, but for its justice, for the proof it offered that society could exist without masters.

Yet even in defeat, the Communards preserved their dignity. The last fighters, trapped among the graves of Père Lachaise, resisted until the end. Many refused to surrender, choosing death over submission. The courage of these men and women impressed even their enemies. A French officer later admitted that “they died like soldiers of a great idea.”

The destruction of the Commune was meant to erase its example, but it achieved the opposite. The flames that consumed Paris illuminated the world. Across Europe, workers’ movements drew strength from the sacrifice of the Communards. Engels wrote that “the memory of the martyrs of 1871 is more powerful than all the armies of Versailles.” The International Workingmen’s Association, though persecuted and divided, carried forward the Commune’s banner. Its red flag, once soaked in Parisian blood, became the symbol of worker solidarity across continents.

Lenin later observed that the defeat of the Commune revealed both the ferocity of the bourgeoisie and the resilience of the proletariat. “The bourgeoisie taught us,” he wrote, “that it will stop at nothing when its power is threatened; the Communards taught us that the working class can rise again even from ashes.” The Bloody Week thus marked not the end of the movement, but its rebirth on a higher plane. The blood of Paris fertilized the soil of future revolutions.

When the guns finally fell silent, the streets of Paris lay in ruins, but something greater had survived — the idea of the Commune itself. No army could destroy it, no execution could erase it. It lived in the thought of Marx and Engels, in the hearts of the workers who sang its songs, and in the vision of Lenin, who half a century later would say, “We are the children of the Paris Commune.”

The vengeance that followed the fall of the Commune was not a mere episode of military repression; it was a class war carried to its most brutal conclusion. The bourgeoisie, which had trembled before the uprising, now exhaled with fury. It was not content to defeat the Communards in battle — it sought to annihilate them as a class, to crush the very possibility of worker rule. In the week that followed the capture of Paris, the ruling class avenged its fear with a cruelty that no foreign invader had ever shown to France.

Adolphe Thiers, speaking before the National Assembly at Versailles, boasted that “order has been restored.” His “order” was written in blood. Soldiers hunted down fugitives through the streets, executing them without trial. The prisons overflowed; tens of thousands were

arrested, and the squares became open-air camps of despair. Men, women, and even children were accused of being Communards simply because they had lived in working-class neighborhoods or bore the marks of labor on their hands. The bourgeois newspapers called for extermination. The *Journal des Débats* declared that "the bleeding of Paris must be complete."

For Marx and Engels, the massacre revealed the true nature of the bourgeois republic. The same politicians who spoke of liberty and civilization had organized a slaughter that rivaled the crimes of empire. "The bourgeoisie of France," Marx wrote, "turned the defense of property into the murder of a people." Their vengeance was not against individuals but against a principle — the principle that the workers could govern themselves. The bourgeoisie had seen in the Commune a mirror reflecting its own moral bankruptcy, and in smashing it, it tried to erase its shame.

The class revenge of Versailles was also ideological. The ruling class unleashed a campaign of slander to poison public memory. The Communards were portrayed as criminals, atheists, and destroyers of family and order. The myth of the *pétroleuses* — women who supposedly set fire to the city — served to dehumanize the brave women who had defended their neighborhoods. Bourgeois historians spoke of "madness" and "delirium," seeking to deny that the Commune had any rational or moral foundation. But this very hatred was proof of fear. The ruling class instinctively recognized that beneath the Commune's brief existence lay a truth more enduring than any regime: that the workers could create a society without masters.

Engels remarked bitterly that "the bourgeoisie showed its heroism only against unarmed prisoners." He compared its behavior to that of the ancient slaveholders who, when their slaves revolted, crucified them along the roads as a warning. The modern bourgeoisie, he said, had simply replaced the cross with the rifle. Yet, despite all its power, it could not kill the idea of the Commune. The same republic that claimed victory over Paris was already haunted by the ghosts of its victims.

In the years that followed, the bourgeoisie sought to bury the memory of 1871 beneath monuments to its own respectability. The bloodied walls of Père Lachaise became silent witnesses to their crime, while the surviving Communards were sent into exile, forced labor, or execution. Thousands were shipped to New Caledonia, condemned to the slow death of colonial imprisonment. But even there, the spirit of the Commune endured. Its exiles carried the flame of revolution across the seas, turning punishment into propagation.

Lenin later wrote that the bourgeoisie's revenge against the Commune revealed the limits of liberal democracy. When its class rule was threatened, it resorted not to persuasion but to extermination. "The bourgeois republic," he said, "shows its class nature not in its speeches, but in its bullets." This truth, which the workers of Paris paid for with their lives, became a guiding thought for later revolutions: that the path to liberation must be defended with the same determination that the oppressors use to maintain their privilege.

Thus, the bourgeoisie's class revenge, intended to erase the Commune, became the final proof of its historical bankruptcy. It demonstrated to the workers of the world that their enemies would stop at nothing to preserve their power, and that their own struggle could rely only on solidarity and courage. The walls of Père Lachaise, once a site of execution, became a shrine. Every drop of blood spilled there marked the beginning of a new chapter in history — one written not by the victors of Versailles, but by the fallen of the Commune.

When the last barricades of Paris fell and the streets ran red with the blood of the Communards, Marx did not respond with despair. He mourned their loss, but he saw beyond the immediate tragedy to the deeper movement of history that it revealed. For Marx, the fall of the Commune was not the end of the working-class struggle, but one of its necessary stages — a moment of defeat that would prepare the ground for future victory. History, he knew, advances through contradictions and sacrifices. The blood of the defeated becomes the seed of new revolutions.

In *The Civil War in France*, written as the Commune was collapsing, Marx refused to treat its failure as a mistake. He explained it as the product of historical conditions not yet fully ripe for socialist transformation. The economic basis of France in 1871 was still predominantly petty-bourgeois; industry was scattered, and the working class, though heroic, lacked national unity and organization. The Commune had anticipated a future that history was only beginning to make possible. "The Commune," Marx wrote, "was the political form at last discovered for the economic emancipation of labor, but that emancipation had yet to be realized." Its fall was therefore not meaningless — it was the first act in a larger historical drama that would unfold across generations.

Marx saw that the defeat of the Commune revealed two truths about class struggle. First, it showed the strength and cruelty of the bourgeoisie when its power is threatened. The rulers of France and Europe had united instantly to destroy a single city of workers. This unity of the oppressors taught the workers of all lands the need for their own international unity. Second, it demonstrated that courage and self-sacrifice, however noble, are not enough. The proletarian revolution requires not only passion but organization — a lesson that Marx drew from the disunity and hesitation that weakened the Commune in its final days.

Yet, in Marx's thought, defeat was never final. He regarded it as a necessary part of historical development, a form of education through struggle. The working class, he believed, learns not from books alone but from its own experience — from its victories and from its defeats. The Commune's fall would teach future generations of workers how to avoid its errors and carry its achievements further. In this way, the defeat of 1871 was also a victory of thought, for it revealed the road that must be taken again, but this time with greater consciousness and preparation.

In his correspondence with Kugelmann, Marx wrote that "whatever may be the immediate result, the attempt of the Paris proletariat will forever remain the most glorious example of our Party, the greatest deed yet accomplished by the working class." These words were not consolation but conviction. Marx understood that the Commune had brought the workers from being a class in itself — defined by economic position — to a class for itself, aware of

its historic mission. In the brief life of the Commune, the proletariat had glimpsed its own destiny.

Engels later echoed this sentiment, noting that "the defeat of the Commune was the victory of its principles." It forced every socialist to think more deeply about the nature of power, the structure of the state, and the necessity of revolutionary organization. The lessons drawn from 1871 became the foundation of the modern workers' movement — guiding the formation of socialist parties and shaping the strategies of future revolutions.

Lenin, interpreting Marx's view decades later, wrote that "the Commune's defeat was the price paid for the future victory of socialism." To him, it proved that the working class could rule and that even in destruction, its spirit remained indestructible. The Commune's fall was a historical necessity, not in the sense of fatalism, but as the painful birth of a new stage in the world struggle for emancipation.

Thus, Marx's understanding of defeat was rooted in the dialectic of history itself: progress born from contradiction, victory from apparent loss. The Commune had not failed because its goal was false, but because it had been the first to reach for it. Its fall was the martyrdom of the new society at the hands of the old. And from its ashes, the international working-class movement emerged stronger, more self-aware, and more united than before.

When Engels looked back upon the brief life of the Paris Commune, his admiration for its heroism was boundless, but so was his determination to learn from its failure. To him, the Commune was both the most glorious uprising of the nineteenth century and a tragic example of how spontaneity, without coordination, can be crushed by organized power. Engels did not criticize the Communards to diminish their achievement; he studied their errors so that future revolutions might succeed where they had fallen. His analysis became one of the most important lessons in revolutionary thought — that courage alone cannot substitute for centralization, discipline, and political clarity.

Engels saw the Commune's first and greatest weakness in its lack of centralization. The workers of Paris, united in will, were divided in organization. The Commune's Council, though elected by the people, reflected a multitude of tendencies — Blanquists, Jacobins, Proudhonists, Internationalists — each with differing ideas of what to do with power. There was no unified revolutionary party to coordinate their efforts or to transform the Commune's defensive struggle into an offensive movement against Versailles. As a result, valuable time was lost in debate while the enemy consolidated its forces. Engels wrote that "the Commune was rich in initiative, but poor in unity," and that this absence of a central directing body left the revolution vulnerable to isolation and confusion.

Closely linked to this was the hesitation of the Commune's leaders in the critical first days. When Thiers and his ministers fled to Versailles after the uprising of March 18, the road lay open. The army was in disarray; the government was without command. Engels, echoing Marx's earlier judgment, declared that this was the moment when a bold advance could have secured victory. "Had the Commune marched immediately on Versailles," he wrote, "the government would have been dispersed like chaff." But the Communards, guided by their

deep respect for democracy and their aversion to civil war, chose to wait for new elections and to seek reconciliation with the provinces. Their moderation — morally admirable — allowed their enemies to recover and prepare for the massacre to come. Engels did not condemn their humanity, but he warned that a revolution, once begun, must act with the decisiveness of a class at war, or perish at the hands of those who will show no mercy.

The Commune's military weakness was the natural consequence of its political isolation. Paris was alone. The provinces, weary of war and misled by bourgeois propaganda, did not rise in support. The National Guard, though brave and numerous, was poorly organized, lacking unified command and strategy. Engels, who had studied war as a science, pointed out that the Commune had failed to form a disciplined revolutionary army or to secure control of surrounding territory. "The defense of Paris was heroic," he wrote, "but it was defense without direction." The Commune's leaders clung to local autonomy and distrusted centralized authority, not realizing that in war, decentralization means defeat.

Yet Engels's criticism was never mechanical. He understood that these weaknesses were not the result of personal failings but of historical conditions. The working class of 1871 had never before exercised power; it lacked experience, training, and a tested organization. Its errors were the errors of pioneers. Engels therefore treated the Commune as a teacher. From its defeat, he drew the lesson that the proletarian revolution requires both mass spontaneity and conscious organization — a union of democratic vitality with disciplined direction. Without the first, the revolution becomes sterile bureaucracy; without the second, it dissolves in noble impotence.

Engels's reflections deeply influenced later generations. He and Marx transformed the tragedy of the Commune into a guide for the future: that the workers must prepare beforehand, form their own political organization, and understand the necessity of defending their revolution with firmness and unity. Lenin would later write that Engels's analysis of 1871 "was a lesson written in fire for all future revolutions," proving that the struggle for liberation demands both democratic participation and revolutionary leadership.

Thus, in studying the Commune's errors, Engels did not find cause for despair but a foundation for progress. The defeat of 1871 was not an end but a lesson, a chapter in the education of the working class. The Communards had shown what could be done by instinct; their successors would learn what must be done by plan. The Commune had lived and died without centralization, but its spirit — disciplined by history — would rise again wherever workers learned to unite courage with organization, and freedom with strength.

When the guns of Versailles fell silent and the last barricades were leveled, it seemed, to the victors, that the idea of the Commune had perished with its defenders. Yet, as Marx and Engels understood, the Commune was not the end of a movement — it was its beginning. The Commune was the first flower of a new social order breaking through the soil of the old, and though it was trampled down, its roots had already spread through the consciousness of the international working class. Its defeat was temporary, but its example was immortal.

Marx called the Commune “the glorious harbinger of a new society,” and in those words lay his deepest understanding of history: that every revolution, even when crushed, leaves behind the seeds of its successor. The Parisian workers had shown what was possible. They had revealed that the working class could govern, that labor could replace privilege, and that democracy could be real rather than merely parliamentary. Their brief experiment had illuminated the path for all future revolutions. What was destroyed in 1871 was a city; what was created was an idea — an idea that could not be killed by bullets or prisons.

Engels often said that the Commune’s greatest achievement was its very existence. “It was,” he wrote, “a political form discovered by the working class, which once set in motion, will never die.” To him, the Commune marked the first time in history that the workers themselves took responsibility for the organization of social life. Every later movement of the working class — from the German Social Democracy to the Russian Soviets — would trace its lineage back to that Parisian spring. The Commune had provided the form, the outline, the moral spirit of the worker state; future generations would fill it with the substance of a mature socialist society.

For Marx and Engels, the Commune’s fall did not signify the failure of socialism, but the immaturity of its conditions. It had appeared too early, in a single city, isolated in a largely peasant country. Yet in its isolation lay its prophetic role. Just as the bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth century prepared the way for the capitalist world, the Commune announced the coming of the proletarian age. It was the bridge between the old world and the new. Its suppression only delayed, not denied, the inevitable course of history — the rise of the working class as the ruling force of society.

Lenin, writing nearly half a century later, captured this sense of continuity. He said that “the Commune was not only a lesson but a prophecy,” and that its spirit had lived on to inspire the Soviets of 1905 and 1917. The Commune, he explained, was a seed planted in the heart of every worker who understood that emancipation must come through collective action. Its lesson — that the workers must seize and remake power — became the guiding principle of Marxist revolution. “We are completing the work begun by the Paris Commune,” Lenin declared in 1917, linking the red flag of Petrograd to the red flag that had once flown over the Hôtel de Ville.

Even in the moment of defeat, the Commune transformed the political imagination of the modern world. It forced every serious thinker to confront the question of who should rule and in whose name. It gave the workers not only a cause but a model — imperfect, unfinished, yet filled with life. As Engels wrote, “The Commune was the dawn of the great day of the proletariat.” Its light did not fade; it spread, refracted through every strike, every socialist movement, every demand for justice that followed.

The Commune’s meaning, then, is not to be sought in its fall but in what it sowed. Its memory is not a monument to tragedy, but a living heritage — a call to continue the work it began. As long as exploitation endures, the idea of the Commune will rise again, renewed in form but unchanged in essence: the self-government of the working people, the creation of a society built not on domination but on solidarity.

Thus, the Commune stands in history not as a failed insurrection, but as the seed of a new civilization. Its martyrs lie in the earth of Père Lachaise, but from that earth grows the tree of socialism. And as long as there are workers who dream of freedom, the Commune will live — not as a memory of the past, but as a promise of the future.

From Marx and Engels to Lenin

When Vladimir Ilyich Lenin entered the stage of history at the beginning of the twentieth century, he inherited not only the teachings of Marx and Engels but also the living legacy of the Paris Commune. The Commune had shown, in blood and fire, the first outline of worker power. For Lenin, who came of age amid the upheavals of the Russian Empire, it was not a distant episode of French history but a model, a living guide for how the working class could organize itself, seize power, and begin the construction of socialism.

The Russian revolutionary movement of Lenin's time faced problems that Marx and Engels had foreseen but had not lived to witness — imperialist war, capitalist monopolies, and the decay of liberal democracy. Yet beneath these new conditions, the essential lesson of the Commune remained unchanged: the old state machine could not be taken over; it had to be destroyed and replaced by a new, worker-controlled structure. Lenin rediscovered this truth not as a mere repetition of Marx's words but as a practical necessity born of the experience of his own time.

In 1905, when the first Russian Revolution broke out, workers in St. Petersburg and other cities formed soviets, or councils, to coordinate strikes and defend their interests. To Lenin, these soviets were the modern heirs of the Paris Commune. Like the Communal councils of 1871, they united legislative and executive power, were elected directly by the people, and represented not a class of officials but the organized working masses themselves. Although the 1905 revolution was defeated, Lenin recognized in these organs the embryo of a future proletarian state. He wrote that "the soviet is the form of government of the working class, as the Commune once was."

When the great Revolution of 1917 approached, Lenin returned to Marx's *The Civil War in France* with renewed urgency. In exile in Switzerland, he reread the text line by line and filled his notebooks with reflections on its meaning. Out of this study came *State and Revolution*, his most systematic work on the nature of the worker state. There, Lenin wrote that Marx's analysis of the Commune "had been distorted and forgotten by opportunists," and that the true task of socialism was to restore and complete the work that the Commune had begun.

Lenin's rediscovery of the Commune was both theoretical and emotional. He admired the Communards' courage, their democratic instinct, and their refusal to separate government from the people. But he also saw their defeat as a lesson in what must be done differently. The Commune had lacked a centralized revolutionary party to unify its struggle; it had hesitated to strike at Versailles; it had underestimated the need for discipline in the face of a

ruthless enemy. From these lessons, Lenin forged his own conception of a party of a new type — not a small conspiratorial group, but a disciplined organization rooted in the working class, able to combine revolutionary spontaneity with conscious direction.

In the dark years of war and reaction, Lenin carried within him the image of the Commune as both inspiration and warning. When he led the Bolsheviks through the Revolution of 1917, he invoked it openly. “We stand on the shoulders of the Paris Commune,” he declared. “Our task is to surpass it.” To Lenin, the Soviet power established in October was the Commune reborn on a national scale, supported by a broader class base and equipped with the political consciousness that history had since ripened.

Yet Lenin never regarded his revolution as the negation of the Commune, but as its continuation. He saw himself not as its conqueror, but as its disciple. The Parisian workers of 1871 had first demonstrated that the proletariat could take power; the Russian workers of 1917, guided by Marxist thought, proved that they could keep it. The same red flag that had flown over the Hôtel de Ville now flew over the Smolny Institute in Petrograd, linking the two revolutions across time and space.

Lenin’s rediscovery of the Commune thus united theory and history into a single current. What Marx had foreseen, and what the Parisian workers had briefly realized, became in his hands the guiding principle of a new age. The Commune was no longer a tragedy confined to France; it became the foundation of a world movement. As Lenin wrote in 1918, “The cause of the Paris Commune is the cause of all workers in every country. It is the cause of the world socialist revolution.”

When Lenin wrote *State and Revolution* in the summer of 1917, the shadow of the Paris Commune stood behind every page. He was not composing an abstract treatise, but preparing for the transformation of power that history had placed within reach. In that moment of approaching revolution, Lenin turned to Marx’s *The Civil War in France* and Engels’ later analyses to recover the true lessons of the Commune — lessons that opportunists and reformists had long buried under the dust of parliamentary illusions. He wrote the book as both an act of rediscovery and as a call to arms, restoring the Commune to its rightful place as the first living model of proletarian rule.

The first lesson, drawn directly from Marx’s words, was the necessity of destroying the old state machine. The Commune had proved that the bourgeois state — with its bureaucracy, police, and standing army — could not be used by the working class. It was a weapon forged for oppression, and therefore could serve no purpose in liberation. Lenin insisted, following Marx, that “the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes.” The state must be shattered, its institutions replaced by new organs of people’s power — soviets or councils modeled on the Commune.

Lenin denounced the false socialists of his day who preached the peaceful “taking over” of the bourgeois state. Such reformism, he said, betrayed the essence of Marxism. The Commune had shown that revolution means the creation of a new kind of authority, one that breaks with the entire structure of exploitation. The workers, by organizing themselves as an

armed people, had abolished the separation between ruler and ruled. “The Commune has taught us,” Lenin wrote, “that the old bureaucratic and military machine must be broken up and replaced by the direct rule of the masses.”

The second lesson was that the worker state is a transitional form, a bridge between capitalism and communism. Marx and Engels had already seen in the Commune “the political form at last discovered” for the emancipation of labor. Lenin gave this discovery systematic form. The worker state, he argued, was not a permanent structure but a temporary instrument — a tool for the suppression of the old exploiting classes and the reorganization of society. Unlike the bourgeois state, which perpetuates class domination, the proletarian state begins its own disappearance from the moment it is born. Its function is to destroy the conditions that make a state necessary at all.

In Lenin’s thought, this transitional state is not a contradiction of freedom, but its means of realization. It is the organized power of the workers, the conscious dictatorship of the proletariat — not over the people, but over the remnants of exploitation. As the economic base of capitalism is transformed into collective ownership, and as class divisions disappear, this state will no longer be needed. It will not be “abolished,” but will disappear, as Engels had foreseen, giving way to a society of free association — communism. In this process, Lenin saw the living continuation of the Commune’s unfinished work: the replacement of coercion by cooperation, of authority by self-administration.

The third lesson was the Commune’s democracy of the workers, which Lenin contrasted sharply with bourgeois parliamentarism. In capitalist democracy, the people’s role is limited to electing representatives who rule in their name but serve the interests of property. The Commune had broken this false democracy by fusing legislation and execution, by making all officials elected, paid as workers, and subject to recall at any time. This, Lenin declared, was “a thousand times more democratic than the most democratic republic.”

For Lenin, the Commune’s model of direct democracy — realized in councils and assemblies — was the practical expression of socialism. The working class could no longer delegate its power; it had to exercise it. The soviets that arose in 1905 and 1917 were, in his eyes, the historical heirs of the Commune’s councils. In them, the people deliberated, decided, and executed their own decisions. “This,” he wrote, “is the true democracy of the working people, replacing the false democracy of the exploiters.”

Lenin’s *State and Revolution* thus united Marx’s theory and the Commune’s experience into a single vision:

- The destruction of the old state apparatus.
- The creation of a transitional worker state.
- The realization of true democracy through the active rule of the working class.

In these principles lay the continuity between Paris 1871 and Petrograd 1917. The Commune had lived for only two months; Lenin sought to make its principles the foundation of a new

world. As he wrote, “We stand on the shoulders of the Paris Commune. It began our work. We shall complete it.”

When Lenin returned to Russia in April 1917, after years of exile, he brought with him a revolutionary vision sharpened by study of the Paris Commune. In the chaos of the collapsing Tsarist Empire and the discredited Provisional Government, he saw the birth of a new power — the Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies — which had arisen spontaneously from the people’s struggle. To Lenin, these Soviets were not a passing form of organization or a temporary committee; they were the modern embodiment of the Paris Commune, its rightful heirs and its living continuation.

Just as the Commune had been created by the armed citizens of Paris, the Soviets emerged from the armed workers and soldiers of Russia. They arose independently of any existing state or party, uniting within them legislative, executive, and military functions. They were both organs of struggle and instruments of power. In their direct, collective, and revocable character, Lenin recognized the same principles that had defined the Commune: popular sovereignty, worker control, and the fusion of politics with the life of labor. “The Soviets,” he wrote, “are the Russian form of the Paris Commune.”

Lenin viewed this continuity not as symbolic, but as historical. The Commune had been the first attempt of the working class to establish its own government; the Soviets were the second, on a broader and more mature foundation. The Russian proletariat, larger and more organized than the Parisian workers of 1871, was supported by the peasantry and concentrated in powerful industrial centers. The lessons that the Communards had paid for with their blood — the need for unity, centralization, and revolutionary determination — were now embodied in the Bolshevik Party. Lenin saw in this convergence of spontaneous self-organization and conscious leadership the completion of what the Commune had begun.

In his speeches and writings throughout 1917, Lenin constantly invoked the example of Paris. He reminded the workers that the Commune had fallen because it hesitated, because it allowed its enemies time to gather strength, because it lacked a disciplined revolutionary party to lead it. “Let us learn from the Commune,” he urged, “not to repeat its hesitation.” His April Theses, presented upon his arrival in Petrograd, were infused with this thought: no support for the bourgeois government, all power to the Soviets. The Bolsheviks, he said, must transform the Soviets from organs of protest into organs of rule.

Lenin’s identification of the Soviets with the Commune also shaped his conception of democracy. He saw in them the highest form of democratic life — not a system of parliamentary representatives separated from the people, but a continuous and collective participation in power. “The Soviets,” he wrote, “are democracy in its purest form, the direct rule of the working people.” Under their structure, every worker, peasant, and soldier could deliberate and decide on questions of state. This was the democracy of workers, not of property owners — the living realization of Marx’s idea that the working class must govern itself.

When the October Revolution came, Lenin described it not as a rupture from history but as its fulfillment. “We are carrying out the cause of the Paris Commune,” he declared. “We are building upon its foundations.” The red flag that had once flown over the Hôtel de Ville now flew over the Smolny Institute and, later, over the Kremlin. To Lenin, the link between the Commune and the Soviets was not metaphorical but organic — both were forms of the same class power, expressing the same social content in different conditions. The Paris Commune had been the dawn; the Soviet Republic was the day.

Yet Lenin remained faithful to the Commune’s spirit of humility and service. He often reminded the revolutionaries of his time that the workers of Paris had shown the world not how to rule others, but how to govern themselves. The Soviets, if they were to remain true to that heritage, must never become instruments of privilege or domination. “Let us be faithful to the Commune,” he wrote, “by keeping our power pure, by serving the workers, by preparing the ground for the disappearance of all classes and all states.”

In this way, Lenin bound together the experiences of two revolutions separated by nearly half a century. The Commune had revealed the form of the future; the Soviets made it reality. Both arose from the same impulse — the desire of working people to direct their own destiny. In the Soviets of 1917, Lenin saw the resurrection of the Commune, no longer confined to one city, but extended across a vast nation. And through that continuity, the dream of Paris became the revolution of the world.

The Commune’s Legacy in World Socialism

The fall of the Paris Commune did not extinguish its flame; it scattered it. The red embers carried by its survivors, by exiles, and by the words of Marx and Engels spread across the continents, igniting hearts and shaping movements for generations to come. The Commune’s life had been brief, but its example entered deeply into the consciousness of the international working class. It became a symbol of both the possibilities and the price of revolution — the first attempt of workers to organize society on their own principles.

In the years following 1871, Europe’s labor movements were still young and divided, struggling between reform and revolution, between parliamentary participation and direct action. The Commune became their shared point of reference, a living standard against which all debates were measured. For Marx and Engels, it was proof that socialism was not a utopian vision but a historical necessity. For the workers of France, Germany, Italy, Britain, and beyond, it became the rallying cry for unity and internationalism.

In France, though the ruling class had drowned the Commune in blood, its spirit refused to die. The exiles who returned from prison and deportation brought with them the memory of collective rule and social equality. The socialist movement that later grew under Jules Guesde and Paul Lafargue — Marx’s own son-in-law — was built upon the conviction that the workers must not repeat the mistakes of 1871: that they must organize politically, form a

unified party, and prepare consciously for power. The songs of the Commune, above all *L'Internationale*, written by Eugène Pottier, became hymns of resistance and hope.

In Germany, where the labor movement was already taking shape under the influence of Marx and Engels, the Commune gave new direction and strength. It taught that the working class could not rely on the bourgeois state or gradual reform, but had to fight for its own power. The newly founded Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) carried the Commune's lessons into the heart of European politics. Engels' and Bebel's speeches honoring the Communards turned their sacrifice into a symbol of proletarian solidarity. Yet even within the SPD, debates emerged between those who treated the Commune as a moral ideal and those who saw it as a practical model for revolution — a tension that would shape the fate of European socialism well into the twentieth century.

In Britain, where Marx had lived and worked, the Commune awakened the socialist movement from its long slumber. Trade unionists and intellectuals alike were struck by the courage of the Parisian workers. Figures such as William Morris and Eleanor Marx drew from the Commune the conviction that socialism must be international, democratic, and rooted in labor. The formation of the Socialist League and later the Independent Labour Party carried within them the memory of 1871 — the belief that the working class could not depend on charity or reform but must rely on its own strength.

Beyond Europe, the Commune's message traveled with astonishing vitality. In Russia, exiled revolutionaries like Plekhanov, Zasulich, and later Lenin studied the Commune as both inspiration and warning. They saw in it the proof that workers could rule, and the need to prepare better than the Communards had been able to. For Russian Marxists, Paris was not a foreign story but a prophecy of their own future. In Asia, especially in China and Vietnam, socialist thinkers of the early twentieth century read Marx's writings on the Commune and drew from them the vision of a society built by workers and peasants themselves, not by imperial powers. Even in distant Latin America, workers' organizations adopted the red flag and the songs of the Commune as emblems of struggle and dignity.

The Commune's influence extended beyond the strictly political realm. It reshaped art, literature, and social imagination. Poets like Verlaine and revolutionary artists like Courbet kept its memory alive through images of resistance and suffering. It gave the world a new type of hero — not a conqueror or monarch, but the anonymous worker behind the barricade, rifle in hand and red flag in heart.

Marx had predicted that "the memory of the Communards will be immortal." Engels later confirmed that their blood had "marked the path of the international labor movement." Both were right. Wherever workers organized, from the factories of Manchester to the mines of the Ruhr, from the docks of Marseille to the fields of Argentina, the Commune was remembered as the first time in history that the working people had seized power for themselves.

The Commune's defeat taught that revolution required preparation; its achievements taught that the workers could govern; its legacy taught that socialism was not a dream, but the next necessary stage in the evolution of society. From 1871 onward, no serious socialist could

think of the future without thinking of Paris. Its name became a synonym for both sacrifice and hope, the first cry of a new world.

From the moment its red flag rose over Paris, the Commune spoke not only for France but for all humanity. In its actions and in its thought, it proclaimed the solidarity of the working class beyond borders, nations, and languages. The Communards did not fight for national glory or conquest; they fought for the emancipation of labor everywhere. In that sense, they embodied the final line of *The Communist Manifesto* — "Workers of all countries, unite." The Commune gave this call of Marx and Engels its living meaning.

During its brief existence, the Commune consciously acted as a power of international scope. Foreign workers who had settled in Paris — Poles, Italians, Belgians, and Germans — fought shoulder to shoulder with the French proletariat. The Commune recognized no national divisions among the laboring people; it appointed foreigners to responsible posts, declaring that the red flag was the flag of humanity. One of its generals, Dombrowski, was a Polish revolutionary; others came from all parts of Europe. When the bourgeois press denounced this as treason, the Commune proudly replied that "our flag is the flag of the Universal Republic."

Marx recognized this internationalism as one of the Commune's highest achievements. "The working class," he wrote, "has no fatherland; it cannot conquer the world without uniting the nations." In the solidarity of Paris's workers with their comrades abroad, Marx saw the first material expression of the International Workingmen's Association's founding principle — that the liberation of labor must be the work of labor itself, organized on a world scale. The Commune's government included members of the International, and its decrees echoed the spirit of proletarian unity.

The bourgeoisie of every nation, however, understood the danger of such unity. They set aside their rivalries to destroy it. Prussian generals released captured French soldiers to help crush the Commune; the rulers of Europe, though enemies in war, became allies in the face of revolution. Engels later observed that this alliance of the ruling classes had its answer in the alliance of the working classes — the birth of international socialism as a conscious movement. "If the bourgeoisie of all countries unite against the workers," he wrote, "so must the workers unite against the bourgeoisie."

After 1871, the Commune became the universal banner of internationalist thought. The International Workingmen's Association, though later divided and persecuted, carried its spirit to every industrial center of Europe. Its message was simple and unbreakable: that the struggle of workers in one country is the struggle of workers everywhere. May 18, the anniversary of the Commune's proclamation, was celebrated by workers' organizations from London to Berlin, from Vienna to Geneva, as a day of remembrance and solidarity.

The Commune's internationalism also shaped the socialist parties that arose in the late nineteenth century. The Second International, founded in 1889, honored the memory of the Commune as its moral origin. Delegates from every country spoke of its lessons and vowed to continue its work. They saw in the red flag of Paris not a national emblem, but a symbol of

the united struggle of labor against capital. “The cause of the Commune is the cause of the world proletariat,” proclaimed the resolution of the International Congress at Brussels.

Even outside Europe, the Commune’s message of unity inspired anti-imperialist and national liberation movements. Revolutionary thinkers in Asia, Africa, and Latin America saw in it the proof that solidarity among the oppressed could transcend national and racial divisions. Chinese and Vietnamese revolutionaries in the twentieth century studied Marx’s writings on the Commune and carried its ideals into their own battles for liberation, interpreting *“Workers of all countries, unite”* as a call for all oppressed peoples to stand together against exploitation in every form.

Lenin, inheriting this vision, gave it new force in the twentieth century. He saw the Soviet Republic not as a purely Russian phenomenon but as the continuation of the Commune’s internationalist mission — “a new step in the same world struggle.” He declared that the victory of the workers in one country could succeed only as part of a global movement, echoing Marx’s own words: “The cause of Paris is the cause of humanity.”

The Commune thus stands in history as the first concrete realization of proletarian internationalism. Its defeat in 1871 did not destroy that ideal; it made it visible. The working class learned that its liberation could never be national, that it must be the joint creation of all who labor. Every socialist flag raised since then — from Berlin to Petrograd, from Havana to Santiago — carries within it the memory of the red banner of Paris, the banner that first united the workers of the world under a single cry: “Workers of all countries, unite.”

More than a century and a half has passed since the fires of the Paris Commune were extinguished, yet its message continues to speak with undiminished force to modern socialists and workers. Its buildings may have been destroyed, its defenders executed or exiled, but its idea remains alive — the idea that those who labor can govern themselves, that freedom is not granted from above but built from below, and that true democracy must rest on social equality. The Commune remains both a memory and a mirror, reflecting to every generation of workers the possibilities and responsibilities of their own struggle.

The first and most enduring message of the Commune is that emancipation must be the work of the workers themselves. Marx, Engels, and Lenin each emphasized that no savior, no benevolent government, and no enlightened minority can free the people. The Parisian workers, by organizing their own councils, decrees, and defense, proved that the working class is capable not only of rebellion but of governance. In every strike, in every movement for collective bargaining, in every demand for dignity at work, this thought endures — that power belongs to those who create the wealth of society. The Commune teaches that the path to socialism is not paternal reform, but collective self-action.

Its second message concerns democracy and power. The Commune showed that democracy cannot be limited to voting once every few years for representatives of the ruling class. It must be continuous, direct, and participatory. The workers of Paris replaced the old bureaucratic machine with councils of elected and recallable delegates — a living democracy of workers. In an age when parliaments and corporations dominate politics and when many

citizens feel powerless, the Commune offers a vision of democracy reborn as self-government. It challenges all modern socialists to transform political participation from a formality into a practice of collective responsibility.

The third message of the Commune is the need for international solidarity. The working class, as the Commune declared in action, has no nation. Its struggle is the same in every land where labor is exploited and where human dignity is denied. Today, when global capitalism binds all peoples through exploitation and profit, the Commune's internationalism is more relevant than ever. It reminds workers that their strength lies not in national divisions but in unity across borders. Every campaign for workers' rights, every act of solidarity with oppressed peoples, carries the echo of the Commune's call: "Workers of all countries, unite."

The Commune also speaks to the moral and human dimension of socialism. It was not a regime of vengeance or cruelty, but one of compassion and justice. Even in the midst of war, it abolished the death penalty, respected opponents, and sought to build education and welfare for all. It reminds modern socialists that the struggle for a new society must reflect the values it seeks to create — equality, solidarity, and respect for human life. In this sense, the Commune was not only a political experiment but a moral awakening, the discovery of a new way of living together.

Lenin often said that the Commune's greatest lesson was the combination of courage and consciousness. The workers of Paris had courage beyond measure; their successors must add organization and clarity of purpose. Modern workers and socialists inherit both tasks. In an age of automation, global inequality, and corporate power, the question posed in 1871 remains unresolved: who controls the fruits of labor — the many who produce, or the few who profit? The Commune answers this question not with rhetoric but with example: the working class must govern, and only through its own institutions can genuine freedom be achieved.

Finally, the Commune's continuing message is one of hope through struggle. It reminds the workers of every country that even in defeat, their cause is not lost. The blood of the Communards nourished the movements that came after them, from the Russian Soviets to every uprising against exploitation and imperialism. Their courage belongs to all who refuse submission. The Commune teaches that no act of solidarity, no effort toward justice, is ever wasted — that the history of the workers is not a series of failures, but a long ascent toward liberation.

For modern socialists, then, the Paris Commune remains both teacher and testament. It shows what humanity can become when freed from exploitation and when united by purpose. It calls every generation to renew its faith in the creative power of labor, in the possibility of collective freedom, and in the certainty that history belongs to those who make it. The red flag that flew over Paris in 1871 still waves, not only as a symbol of revolt, but as a sign of the world that can and must be built — a world where the people themselves rule in the name of humanity.

The Paris Commune remains, to this day, the purest expression of what Marx, Engels, and later Lenin meant by communism — a society built upon the conscious and democratic self-rule of the working class. Yet the name "communism" has since been burdened and deformed by regimes that betrayed its very essence. To understand the Commune's enduring legacy, and to defend the true idea of Marxist–Leninist communism, it is necessary to distinguish the living tradition of the Commune from the bureaucratic distortions that later appeared under Stalin and other authoritarian systems that falsely called themselves socialist.

Marx and Engels conceived communism not as a doctrine of command but as the self-emancipation of labor. Its goal was the disappearance of class divisions and, with them, the state itself as an organ of coercion. The Commune gave this conception its first form: a worker government of elected, recallable delegates; no standing army; no bureaucracy standing above the people; and no privileges separating rulers from the ruled. Marx described it as "the finally discovered political form" of liberation — a structure that allowed society to begin freeing itself from all forms of domination. Engels and Lenin both understood that communism could only grow from this soil of democracy and equality.

Lenin's own struggle before and after 1917 was to preserve this vision against the dangers of bureaucracy and the habits of the old world. He saw the Soviets as the modern embodiment of the Commune — flexible, popular, collective, and transparent. His writings in State and Revolution warned explicitly that if the organs of worker power lost their connection with the masses, if officials ceased to be subject to recall and accountability, the new state could become corrupted and cease to be socialist. The transition from capitalism to communism, he insisted, required vigilance against privilege and hierarchy. The worker state was to be an instrument of transformation — not a new apparatus of tyranny.

After Lenin's death, however, history took another path. The rise of Stalinism in the Soviet Union marked a profound break with the principles of the Commune and with Marxist–Leninist thought. The living organs of worker democracy — the Soviets — were gradually emptied of content. Power was concentrated in the hands of a bureaucratic elite that claimed to speak for the working class while silencing its voice. The socialist idea of collective self-rule was replaced by a system of administrative command. Instead of the Commune's open councils, there emerged ministries, police organs, and party hierarchies that mirrored the very bourgeois state Marx had warned must be destroyed.

These bureaucratic regimes invoked Marx and Lenin in words, but denied them in action. The Commune had abolished privilege; Stalinism recreated it in the form of the bureaucracy. The Commune had governed through participation; Stalinism ruled through fear and decree. The Commune had sought to disappear the state through the free association of workers; Stalinism expanded the state into every corner of life. The Commune's red flag stood for liberation; under Stalin, it was used to justify repression. Thus, Stalinism was not the continuation of Lenin's communism but its opposite — a reversion to the old forms of domination under a new name.

True Marxist–Leninist communism, faithful to the spirit of the Commune, is built upon the active role of the workers in all spheres of life — political, economic, and cultural. It

demands the abolition of exploitation and privilege, but it also demands the broadest democracy, founded upon equality of participation and control from below. It is internationalist in spirit, humane in purpose, and guided by the belief that freedom grows through solidarity, not through command. Its aim is not the worship of the state, but its eventual disappearance in a classless society.

Engels once said that "the Commune was the grave of the old state." Under Stalinism, that grave was reopened, and the corpse of the old order reassembled. Yet the memory of the Commune continues to remind socialists of what genuine communism must be — a movement not of rulers but of workers, not of coercion but of cooperation. Lenin himself foresaw this danger when he warned, near the end of his life, that bureaucracy could "choke the revolution from within." His final writings, full of urgency and doubt, show that he still held fast to the Commune's ideal of democratic self-government.

For modern socialists and workers, this distinction is essential. To defend the Commune is to defend the original, human meaning of communism — the unity of freedom, equality, and solidarity. It is to reject all regimes that turn the name of socialism into an instrument of oppression. The Commune's legacy belongs not to those who built empires in its name, but to those who continue its work: the building of a society in which the people themselves rule, where labor is free and conscious, and where no state or class stands above humanity.

Thus, the Paris Commune remains the compass that points true communism toward its original path — away from tyranny, toward collective liberation. It reminds us that socialism without democracy is a lie, and that the revolution of workers must always be guided by the same principle that lit the streets of Paris in 1871: the self-government of the working people for the good of all humankind.

The greatest truth revealed by the Paris Commune — and confirmed by all subsequent history — is that freedom and equality cannot exist without the power of the working class. Every other form of government, whether monarchic, bourgeois-democratic, or bureaucratic, has preserved inequality by keeping the workers away from power. The Commune broke that chain for the first time. It proved in action that the emancipation of humanity requires not the substitution of one ruling class for another, but the direct self-rule of those who labor.

The Commune's brief life offered the world a vision of freedom born not from decrees, but from participation. The people of Paris, by governing themselves through elected and revocable councils, discovered that liberty is not the absence of authority but the collective control of society by its members. Marx understood this as the central revelation of 1871. "The Commune," he wrote, "was the political form at last discovered through which the economic emancipation of labor could be realized." In that single sentence lay the synthesis of freedom and equality: only when the workers hold political power can social equality become real, and only through equality can genuine freedom be achieved.

Engels, reflecting years later, explained that the Commune had achieved what no previous revolution had dared to attempt — the identification of freedom with labor. It was not a democracy of owners, but a democracy of workers. Every law, every decree, every act of the

Commune sought to make society transparent to those who worked within it. By abolishing privilege, it abolished the separation between rulers and ruled. This unity of freedom and equality remains the core of the Marxist vision of communism and the heart of Lenin's continuation of that vision.

Lenin took this lesson as the foundation of *State and Revolution* and of his entire revolutionary practice. He saw that the Commune's essence was worker power — the creative energy of millions acting in common. Freedom, he wrote, cannot exist without equality, and equality cannot exist without the power of the working people to organize and defend it. The worker state was not, in his view, a contradiction of liberty but its necessary condition — a means by which the majority could dismantle the old structures of exploitation and build a society in which freedom would no longer serve privilege but humanity itself.

In the world of today, where inequality grows even under the banner of democracy, the Commune's truth remains unrefuted. Political rights without economic power are empty forms. A parliament that represents the rich cannot bring freedom to the poor. Real democracy requires that those who produce the wealth of society also direct its use. The Commune's lesson to modern workers and socialists is clear: freedom and equality are not gifts to be granted by rulers, but powers to be exercised by the people themselves.

The enduring truth of the Commune is also moral. It showed that the pursuit of equality does not destroy liberty but completes it. The workers of Paris did not abolish freedom when they seized power; they made it universal. They proved that collective power, when guided by justice and solidarity, liberates rather than enslaves. They revealed that the highest form of individuality grows not in competition, but in cooperation.

This is the truth that every generation must rediscover: that freedom and equality cannot live within a society divided by class. They can only live through the conscious and organized power of those who work — through councils, assemblies, and collective control of production. The Commune's red flag, still remembered by workers around the world, is not merely a symbol of revolt; it is the emblem of this truth — that liberty belongs to the hands that create, and equality belongs to the hearts that labor together.

As long as exploitation endures, the Commune's truth remains alive. Every strike that demands dignity, every protest against injustice, every effort to unite workers across borders is a step in the same direction that Paris took in 1871. The Commune's message endures because it speaks to the deepest human need — the desire to live as free and equal beings, shaping our collective destiny. Its lesson is timeless: freedom and equality are not dreams, but realities made possible only through worker power, the creative force that builds the world and, one day, will rebuild it anew.

Conclusion

The Paris Commune of 1871 stands at once as a historical event and as a living idea — an event that shook the world in its time, and an idea that continues to illuminate the path of human emancipation. Its existence was brief, measured in weeks, yet its meaning transcends centuries. It was the first moment in modern history when the working class, conscious of its own strength, took the reins of power and attempted to reorganize society in its own image. And though it was crushed by force, it left behind a truth that no power has ever been able to destroy: that the workers, united and organized, can govern themselves and transform the world.

As a historical event, the Commune was born from the contradictions of capitalism and empire, from the misery of the siege and the betrayal of the bourgeois republic. It was not a dream conjured by philosophers but a necessity born of life itself. It arose when the people of Paris, weary of hunger and humiliation, took up arms to defend their dignity and discovered in that act their collective capacity to rule. Its decrees — the abolition of the standing army, the secularization of education, the equality of women, the rights of labor — were not utopian abstractions but the concrete expressions of justice forged in struggle. For the first time, politics ceased to be the privilege of the few and became the daily practice of the many.

As a living idea, the Commune belongs not to the past but to the future. Marx, Engels, and Lenin each recognized in it the embryo of a new social order — the beginning of the worker state, the political form of socialism, and the moral spirit of a society without classes. The Commune showed that liberation cannot come from above, that freedom without equality is a lie, and that equality without power is an illusion. It remains the eternal reminder that true democracy can only be built upon the foundation of collective ownership and the direct participation of the working people in the decisions that shape their lives.

The Commune lives wherever workers refuse to be silent, wherever the exploited demand to be heard, and wherever human beings act together to reclaim their dignity. It lives in every struggle for fair wages, for social justice, for education and healthcare, for the right to control the conditions of one’s own labor. It lives in the councils, assemblies, and movements that strive to make power a shared reality rather than a privilege. It lives in the thought of those who, like Marx, Engels, and Lenin, saw in it the key to the transformation of the world — the first dawn of the society that humanity has yet to complete.

The Commune’s death was violent, but its idea remains peaceful in essence, rooted in cooperation, solidarity, and the belief in the creative capacity of ordinary people. It is both warning and inspiration: warning against the cruelty of the old order that destroyed it, and inspiration to all who continue the fight for a world without exploitation. The workers of Paris proved that freedom is not a gift but a conquest; equality is not a promise but a practice; and socialism is not an abstract theory but the living organization of life itself.

Thus, the Commune endures not as a monument to tragedy but as a banner of hope. It calls to the conscience of the modern world with the same clarity as it did in 1871 — to build a society where power belongs to those who work, where justice is born from solidarity, and where humanity governs itself in freedom and equality. In this sense, the Commune is immortal. Its spirit walks with every generation that dreams of liberation, reminding us that

history is not yet finished, and that the future still belongs to the working people who dare to make it their own.

The Paris Commune, though short-lived, became an inexhaustible source of thought, inspiration, and guidance for the three greatest teachers of socialism — Marx, Engels, and Lenin. Each saw in it something distinct, yet all saw the same essence: the first living revelation of the working class as a ruling force, the dawn of a new epoch in human history. From the ruins of Paris, each drew the lessons that would complete and carry forward the idea of communism — Marx with theory, Engels with clarity, and Lenin with action.

Marx was the first to recognize the Commune's world-historic meaning. While others saw only chaos or defeat, Marx discerned in it the theoretical confirmation of his entire materialist conception of history. He understood that the Commune was not an accident or a dream but a necessary product of capitalist society's inner contradictions. It had shown that the state, as an instrument of class rule, could not be seized — it had to be broken and replaced by the self-government of the workers. In The Civil War in France, Marx gave the Commune its voice before the world and laid the foundation for all revolutionary thought thereafter. From the courage of the Parisians, he drew the conviction that the working class was not merely an exploited class but the creator of a new civilization. The Commune was for Marx what practice is to thought — the proof that theory lives only when embodied in struggle.

Engels, the co-architect of scientific socialism, deepened this understanding and gave it clarity for the generations to follow. He called the Commune "the dictatorship of the proletariat," not in the sense of tyranny, but as the most democratic form of rule ever created — the collective power of the majority over the minority that had long exploited it. Engels admired the Commune's modesty, its moral discipline, and its devotion to equality. Yet he also studied its errors, so that its successors might overcome them. From its failure, he learned the necessity of unity, coordination, and revolutionary firmness. For Engels, the Commune was the bridge between the dream of freedom and the science of revolution. It taught him that the liberation of labor required not only passion but preparation — the organized strength of a class conscious of its mission.

Lenin, inheriting the lessons of both, transformed them into living practice. He saw in the Commune the model of the future state — the workers' councils that would later take shape as Soviets in Russia. From its triumphs, he drew faith in the creative power of the masses; from its defeat, he drew the understanding that revolution must be guided by organization and theory. "The Commune taught us," Lenin wrote, "that the old state machine must be broken, and that the working people must create their own." The Commune's image never left his mind; even in the midst of revolution, he regarded the Soviets as its continuation and perfection. In uniting Marx's theory with the Commune's example, Lenin found the path to the future — the realization of socialism as both a science and a living movement.

Together, Marx, Engels, and Lenin turned the tragedy of the Commune into the foundation of modern socialism. Marx gave it meaning; Engels gave it structure; Lenin gave it life. Each in his time preserved the Commune's essence — the conviction that freedom and equality can

exist only through the power of the working people themselves. In their writings, the Commune ceased to be a lost uprising and became a guide for all revolutions to come.

To modern workers and socialists, this unity of thought remains the greatest inheritance. From Marx, the Commune teaches that revolution is the natural outcome of social conditions; from Engels, that it must be organized with discipline and understanding; from Lenin, that it can be achieved only when theory and action are joined by courage. The Commune thus stands at the center of their shared legacy — the living thread that binds the scientific study of society to the heroic faith in humanity's capacity to transform it.

The Commune gave Marxism its form, socialism its conscience, and communism its human face. In the courage of its fighters, the clarity of its purpose, and the universality of its dream, it offered a path that still leads forward. The thought of Marx, Engels, and Lenin remains inseparable from the spirit of the Commune — the spirit of workers who, for the first time, dared to govern the world they had built with their hands.

The Paris Commune continues to speak across time with a voice that has never faded — the voice of human liberation. It was not merely a revolt against oppression; it was a declaration of faith in the creative power of humanity itself. The Commune called not only for political freedom, but for the transformation of life — for a society in which every human being could develop fully, in harmony with others, freed from exploitation and want. It was a movement not of destruction, but of creation; not of vengeance, but of renewal. Its eternal call is for social liberation joined with collective human development — the full unfolding of human potential through cooperation, equality, and solidarity.

Marx saw in the Commune the first true realization of this vision. To him, it was not only the struggle of the working class against its oppressors, but the birth of a new form of civilization. He wrote that the Commune "was essentially a government of the working class, the result of the struggle of the producing class against the appropriating class, the political form under which the economic emancipation of labor could take place." In this idea lay the deepest meaning of socialism — that human beings can be free only when the conditions of their existence are their own creation, when society is organized by those who labor for the benefit of all.

Engels understood the same truth: that the Commune represented the fusion of freedom with necessity. No longer was freedom to be understood as the right of the few to exploit the many, but as the collective mastery of humanity over its own social life. The Commune's structures — its councils, its revocable delegates, its open participation — embodied this transformation. They turned politics into a school of human development. In learning to govern, the workers learned to grow; in acting together, they discovered the creative strength of solidarity. This, Engels believed, was the beginning of a new stage of human history — the conscious organization of life by free and equal beings.

Lenin carried this call into the twentieth century. For him, the Commune was not a closed chapter, but a continuing task. It revealed the fundamental aim of communism: to create a society where labor is not a burden but a joy, where education and culture are accessible to

all, and where the development of each person is the condition for the development of all. “The Commune,” Lenin said, “was the forerunner of the new society in which human labor will no longer be enslaved, but will become the first necessity of life.” He saw socialism as the means by which the human personality, long stifled by exploitation, could finally unfold — the transition from alienation to cooperation, from servitude to creativity.

The Commune’s call for liberation remains as vital in our time as it was in 1871. It reminds modern humanity that progress cannot be measured by wealth or power, but by the growth of the human spirit — by the extent to which society allows every individual to think, work, and live freely as part of a community of equals. In a world still divided by inequality and driven by greed, the Commune’s message cuts through the noise of profit and competition with timeless clarity: that the true purpose of society is not accumulation, but the shared flourishing of all.

The Commune’s defenders did not fight for a nation or a class alone; they fought for humanity. Their dream was universal: that no person should live at another’s expense, that no power should stand above the collective will, and that the dignity of labor should be the measure of civilization. They believed that freedom without equality is hypocrisy, and equality without solidarity is emptiness. This belief is the soul of the Commune — its eternal call that still resonates in every struggle for justice, every demand for dignity, every step toward a more humane world.

Thus, the Commune’s message endures not only as a political lesson but as a moral truth. It reminds us that the liberation of society and the development of humanity are one and the same process. The Commune’s legacy is not only the cry for revolution, but the vision of what follows — a society where cooperation replaces competition, where every human being can unfold their capacities in the collective life of all. Its voice, born in the streets of Paris, still speaks to the conscience of the world: let humanity govern itself, let labor be free, let equality and freedom live together through the power of those who create the world with their hands.

Sources

The Civil War in France, Karl Marx, 1871

Letters to Kugelmann, Karl Marx, 1871

Introduction to The Civil War in France, Friedrich Engels, 1891

On the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Paris Commune, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, 1921

Lessons of the Commune, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, 1908

State and Revolution, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, 1917

Critique of the Gotha Programme, Karl Marx, 1875

Anti-Dühring, Friedrich Engels, 1878

The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, Karl Marx, 1852

Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany, Friedrich Engels, 1852

History of the Paris Commune of 1871, Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray, 1876

The Paris Commune 1871, Frank Jellinek, 1937

The Paris Commune, Alistair Horne, 1965

The Paris Commune of 1871: The View from the Left, Eugene Schulkind (ed.), 1972

The Women Incendiaries, Edith Thomas, 1963

The Communards of Paris, Stewart Edwards (ed.), 1973

The Paris Commune, Donny Gluckstein, 2006

The Paris Commune, Robert Tombs, 1999

Procès-verbaux of the Commune Council (Archives Nationales, Paris, 1871)

Decrees and Proclamations of the Commune (Bulletin Officiel de la Commune de Paris, March–May 1871)

Reports of the International Workingmen's Association on the Commune (General Council minutes, London, 1871)